



Humour and History

Presented by Keith Cameron

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1—

Humour and History

Keith Cameron

Mieux est de ris que de larmes escrire Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme. [Better of laughter than of tears to write For laughter is indeed to man unique.]
(Rabelais: *Gargantua*)

To write on the theme of humour and history is in many ways to undertake a study of the whole history of mankind. Aristotle felt that laughter is a distinctive trait of humanity and one which distinguishes us from the animals; early treatises on medicine establish a correlation between laughter and good health; Democritus and Heraclitus in their respective philosophical response to life opted one for laughter, the other for tears, in the face of the human condition.

The aim of this book is to examine some of the facets of humour in its broadest sense, one which encompasses satire, irony, and ridicule. In short, man's attitude to laughter and his use of it to influence public opinion. If we agree with Bergson (*Le Rire*) that laughter is society's weapon to criticise departures from the norm, from the expected, to punish and to correct idiosyncrasies, then it should be possible to detect a relationship between the use of humour and the course of history. The contributors to the volume were asked, as their brief, to study within their various fields (psychology, philosophy, drama, theology, sociology and the humanities) uses of, or theories about, humour. The result is a fascinating insight into the role humour has played in various European cultures throughout their history.¹

Humour has since time immemorial been a source of consolation and of defence against the unknown and the inexplicable. The very existence of man can be considered a 'joke'; his purpose is ill-defined and difficult to

justify unless it be in christian/religious terms. C. S. Lewis expressed the belief that procreation/passion was one of the paradoxes of creation:

I can hardly help regarding it as one of God's jokes that a passion so soaring, so apparently transcendent, as Eros, should thus be linked in incongruous symbiosis with a bodily appetite which, like any other appetite, tactlessly reveals its connections with such mundane factors as weather, health, diet, circulation, and digestion.²

One of the great achievements of the civilisation process has been the emergence and evolution of the theatre. Alongside the fateful genre of tragedy has developed the comic theatre. Whereas classical tragedies dealt with kings and queens and extraordinary events, comedy was concerned more with daily life and its preoccupations; it was considered to be the *speculum mundi* or 'mirror of the world'. Comedy thrives on the human foible of being prepared to laugh at the folly of others and is supposed to encourage the spectator to avoid ridiculous conduct in his own life.

The fear of ridicule seems to be innate. Although we may appear ridiculous in the eyes of others it is only our awareness of the fact which can influence our own behaviour. Friends and enemies alike take it upon themselves to point out our individual defects and thus bring a social pressure to bear upon our comportment. What is worrying is when a person becomes the object of ridicule as a deliberate means of undermining not only his prestige but also his confidence.

Satire has long been used as a means of discrediting those in authority. Whether it is in the form of a pamphlet, novel, poem, caricature or film, etc. its aim is to underline and exaggerate the emotional, political, sexual, physical, etc., traits of the opponent/s. Juvenal penned satirical portraits of a corrupt Roman society; Pope took his contemporaries to task; Swift saw Gulliver as a means of highlighting political incompetents; McGillray painted the caricatural politicians under George III as well as the unfortunate king and his royal siblings, etc.

In France, in the sixteenth century, the hostile factions against Henri III mounted a most vicious and successful campaign of vilification of the monarch.³ The polemical agents were probably formed amongst English Catholic refugees who had sought haven in France and had there developed the art of political satire against Elizabeth I, which greatly intensified after the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1587. The polemic revealed itself in scurrilous verses, in a myriad prose pamphlets and in the form of

satirical prints which poured scorn and ridicule upon the king, showing him to have diabolical qualities both in his appearance and in his actions. His character was further maligned by accusations of sexual deviance and many stories of the 'dirty joke' variety circulated about his alleged homosexuality. The sexual innuendo and accusation of sexual deviance are, and have been, used widely in attacking persons in the upper echelons of the social/political hierarchy. Before Henri III, we could mention a number of Roman emperors, Edward II and Gaveston, Anne Boleyn, etc., all of whom were accused of sexual misdemeanours which ridiculed and hence demeaned them in the eyes of the uninformed public. It is one of the ironies of life that once a person is accused of a sexual 'crime', the stigma remains even if it is subsequently proved that the accusation was false.

Although the object of ridicule and the clown are generally considered to be 'good fun' or 'good company', there is a natural tendency to be a little wary of them. They are not to be taken seriously, or the cause of their ridicule makes us suspicious of them as 'responsible persons'. Is it because we feel that anyone who is 'funny' or humorous is behaving physically or linguistically in a way which shows that his actions/ words are controlled by other forces than reason? In fact, if we come back to our original premiss that laughter is provoked when there is a departure from the norm, anyone who can be made fun of, or who can cause us to laugh because of something ridiculous in her/his behaviour beyond her/his control, can be esteemed to have lost something of her/his normality and hence is less worthy of trust and respect.

In the present age, the powerful forces of the media control, in spite of their protests of impartiality, our view of the world, especially the contemporary world of politics and social conditions. The influence of the media is often so subtle that we are unconscious of it, and yet our opinions can be influenced by an expression or even by a camera shot. The material of the media is always edited in some way or another. A skilful editor can, by juxtaposing certain images or certain words, introduce an element of pathos, bathos and humorous ridicule.

In the aftermath of recent elections, members of all parties have accused the media of presenting their case or that of their adversaries unfavourably. One recent political leader was made to look ridiculous by only showing clips of speeches when his rhetoric was at its highest pitch, where, taken out of context, what was being said resembled more a parody of a speech than a

sensible, reasoned argument. Some of his own supporters made gentle, harmless fun of him by dubbing him Pinocchio. Such a well-intended pun on his name may have had disastrous consequences in the minds of those who were familiar with the term, for subconsciously most of us associate Pinocchio with a little boy with a prominent nose and a tendency to tell lies!

Another political leader was labelled humorously by the press, 'the Iron Lady'. This name caught on and it is a matter for some conjecture as to whether her political stance thereafter was influenced by the need to live up to a sobriquet so as to convert it into a character trait. Who can say if the history of British politics would have been different if such a leader had been simply nicknamed the 'Diplomat of Europe'?

Humour, then, can, when used in a certain way, bring about the downfall of a person or can change her/his comportment. All of us can find numerous examples similar to the ones that have been adumbrated.

Hopefully, the contributions to this volume will provide the necessary historical perspective for our understanding of humour. In some ways the various chapters could, at first, appear disparate, their authors coming from various disciplines, each with his own interpretation of the theme. And yet, it is this very diversity which points to the ubiquity of humour and to the multiplicity of forms in which it is manifest. One would have thought that a human trait as widespread as humour would have been successfully defined, yet as the philosopher who opens the volume and the psychologist who closes it illustrate, there is a considerable divergence of opinion and a multitude of categories and subcategories and no universal agreement about its nature. No one, however, can deny its existence!

As we read of the niceties of Greek comedy or Roman satire, of the devil in Protestant Britain and of eighteenth-century caricature, we realise that taste evolves. Although the laugh may be constant through the ages, although the recourse to humour as a social weapon is always in evidence, the stuff of humour changes. Humour reflects the interests and the mentality of the period in which it is produced. Perhaps the only satisfactory definition of the humorous will be one which is constantly updated to take into account the age of those concerned, their social background, their cultural interests, etc. The essay which follows the evolution of the use of irony stresses the complex changes which have to be considered. The discussion of 'l'esprit gaulois' or 'Gallic salt' reveals the

misconceptions that can arise because of doubtful attributions of certain humorous tendencies to a given civilisation, attributions based on imperfect knowledge of the past.

Earlier, I emphasised the mechanisms of humour, and what the various studies in this collection show is the long life of such mechanisms. They also highlight the need to follow the scholar in the interpretation of the past so as to have a clearer, more 'objective' view of history. A cynic might say that given the elusive nature of humour, the essays throw as much light on the preoccupations of their authors as on the object of their study. To a certain extent this is true but I like to feel that attention has been drawn to one of the most quintessential of human pursuits, that of truth. After all, as Horace once remarked:

ridentem dicere verum
Quid vetat?
(What is there against telling the truth in laughter?)

Notes

¹ Each of the contributions that follow was read originally as a paper in a series of open lectures given in the Faculty of Arts, University of Exeter, 1991-1992.

² Lewis C.S., (1960), *The Four Loves*, London, Collins, Fount Paperbacks, p. 93.

³ See my (1978) *Henri III - a maligned or malignant king?* (Aspects of the satirical iconography of Henri de Valois), University of Exeter Press; and 'L'illustration au service de la propagande contre Henri III', in *Le Livre et l'image en France au XVI^e siècle*, Paris, 1989, pp. 89-104. See also, Sydney Anglo, (1989) 'Henri III: Some Determinants of vituperation', in *From Valois to Bourbon*, ed. Keith Cameron, University of Exeter Press, pp. 5-20.

2—

Humour in Philosophy

Ronald F. Atkinson

It was not brought home to me until I had delivered the lecture on which this chapter is based that I had simply assumed that my topic had to be philosophical discussions of humour rather than humorous writing by philosophers. This no doubt reflected the suspicion that there could not be a great deal of the latter, though of course there is some. More surprisingly, there seems not to be very much of the former either, though it may be that I have failed to look in the right places. 'Humour' and indeed 'wit' acquired their modern senses only fairly recently; and accounts of the humorous may be buried in the discussions of comedy, and of the ridiculous as the antithesis of the sublime, that are to be found in the works of otherwise solemn aestheticians. Whatever the truth of the matter, all I offer is a few comments on the opinions of a few philosophers. I do so, of course, in the hope that it will be recognised that, since philosophy is a second order subject which does not necessarily share the characteristics of that which it is comment upon, it will not be held against me if I fail to be amusing.

Major philosophers who have discussed humour include Hobbes, Bergson, Kant and Schopenhauer. Freud, though not primarily a philosopher, can hardly escape mention too. Three main types of theory of humour are commonly recognised: by, for example, D. H. Munro in his *Argument of Laughter* (Melbourne and Cambridge, 1953). They are: the superiority theory of Hobbes and Bergson - laughter reflects our satisfaction at not being the one who slips on a banana skin; incongruity theories, Kant and Schopenhauer - humour lies, for example, in the incongruity of the half-naked beggar claiming to be well dressed for a cold day because he is wearing his whole wardrobe at once; relief or release theories, Aristotle perhaps, certainly Freud - when the bear turns out to be a bush after all, when scorn and mockery are harmlessly purged at a comedy, or we laugh at the discomfiture of our parents. I shall not attempt to defend any theory or indeed this rough classification of them; I mention them only in order to indicate the shape of the wood before going on to look at some of the trees.

I lack space to offer a systematic classification of the objects of humour, though it is by their capacity to fit them that theories of humour have to be assessed. The task is complicated by the relativity of the humorous to context: what is funny in one context may well not be so in another - even the best jokes stand less repetition than they get. Not only would it be a gigantic task to construct a taxonomy, it would most likely be question begging, in that there would be a strong temptation to identify as humour exactly those cases which fit a favoured theory. On the other hand, though, it would be rash to assume that everyone understands humour in the same way. I therefore, with misgiving, and only as an indication of what I shall have in mind henceforward, offer the following outline classification, which I have adapted from Munro.

1. Unusual, unconventional, counter-normative incidents or actions
2. The inappropriate and/or incongruous
3. The accidental - banana skins
4. The ignorant - howlers, an old favourite is 'nomads' for 'monads' in essays on Leibniz
5. The disguised or veiled
6. Word play or nonsense
7. Such literary genres as comedy and satire

I have re-arranged these cases to run from the typically inadvertent to the intentional. I am tempted to generalise that whatever is accidentally or naively funny will also be funny to simulate or to mimic.

Superiority Theories

Hobbes' most famous discussion of humour is in *Leviathan*, Book I, Chapter 6. (There are comparable passages in his *Human Nature*.) He has earlier stipulated that joy, arising from the thought of one's own power or ability, is to be called glory, and continues: 'Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those Grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of [people's] own that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves'. He adds sourly, 'And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men.' (Plato's condemnation of mocking great men in the *Republic* perhaps reflects the somewhat similar belief that laughter evinces an insecure feeling

of superiority in the subject.) For Hobbes, anyway, humour is the rather disagreeable business of self-congratulation and reassurance in face of the misfortune of others. The view, as so far stated, does not, however, fit genial laughter. Alexander Bain, a nineteenth-century philosopher, who favoured a more or less Hobbist psychology, seems to have tried to extend the view in the way required, by allowing that it was possible for laughter to express one's sympathy with someone else's triumphs. This helps, though it still involves laughing-with having as a component laughing-at. Bain felt, indeed, that all laughter involved what he called some 'degradation' of its object; though he did not insist, as perhaps Hobbes assumed, that the degraded object had to be a person - it could be anything that is conventionally treated with respect. Authors tend here to quote Samuel Butler's likening of the rising sun to a boiled lobster, with which I cannot help associating Raymond Asquith's equally happy image of the noonday sun as a bishop's bottom, 'rosy, and round, and hot'.

Another move, which helps extend the range of the superiority theory, is to allow that some laughter at least is, as it were, from a God's eye point of view. God has no need to prove himself superior to human beings. He can afford to laugh at our funny little ways without malice and with affection. In so far as we can adopt his point of view it could be allowed - and this would otherwise be difficult for a superiority theory - that we could laugh at ourselves.

Henri Bergson is another who, in his book on laughter (*Le Rire*, 1899) expresses a kind of superiority theory. Humour is not exactly our glorying over the unfortunate à la Hobbes; but it is a matter of the free spirit soaring triumphantly over the determined, the inflexible, the mechanical; mind detaching itself from matter; almost the for-itself transcending the in-itself. Sartre, here as elsewhere, is close to Bergson.

Bergson's two main themes are: that the object of laughter, the comic, is the inflexible; and that laughter is essentially a social phenomenon - we cannot appreciate the comic in isolation: before Man Friday appeared Robinson Crusoe could not laugh. Bergson pushes his two theses, which do not fit very well together, to absurd lengths. All the same he writes with distinction and discrimination and, whatever the defects of his theory, he seems to have more feeling for the humorous than the other philosophical authors considered here.

His first thesis is that human actions become comic when they degenerate into instances of the laws of nature: once the man steps on the

banana skin the rest is only coefficients of friction, centres of gravity and the laws of motion. Again, rigid routines are comic if maintained in face of manifest danger, witness A.G. MacDonnell's Scottish ingénue, who pauses to pick up a sixpence as the artillery opens up (*England Their England*). Bergson assures us that human movements are laughable in exact proportion as the body comes to resemble a machine or a puppet on a string. Imitation is comic because only the mechanical can be imitated; hence the repetitiveness that is a feature of some comedies. Anything that forces the physical on our attention, when it is the mental or spiritual that is in question, is apt to be funny: sneezing at a tender moment, hiccups at the altar. Tragic heroes and heroines, we are told, can neither eat, drink, nor relieve themselves, whilst such activities are staples in the coarser comedies.

So far all is at least intelligible, as indeed it remains when Bergson contends that the comic character amuses because of its rigidity: habits, ruling passions, professional deformations. But his ambition overreaches itself when he tries to bring verbal humour, word play and nonsense, within the scope of his theory. One might have expected reference to invention, ingenuity, creativity; but not so. It is rather a matter of rigidity, inflexibility; with the routines of language making us laughable in the way that our conformity to the laws of motion has the same effect when we fall from a cliff. So, what we are supposedly amused at in Lewis Carroll's

'T'was brillig and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe',

is not the inspired blend of sense and nonsense, but the regularity of the grammatical and metrical forms in which it is expressed. Again, presumably, the Nobody jokes in *Through the Looking Glass* - 'Nobody walks faster than I do,' said Alice. 'He can't do,' said the King, 'or he'd have been here first.' - owe their point to their grammatical regularity, not their derangement of logical categories. Similarly we would have to suppose that the anti-metaphysical amusement provoked in Ayer and Carnap by Heidegger's 'Nothing nothings' arose from its conventional grammar, not its wayward thought.

Bergson's contentions are very strange for such a subtle and sophisticated thinker. One can only suppose that a passion for generality - itself a manifestation of professional inflexibility, and as such mildly risible - led him to focus mainly on cases where absent-minded speaking or writing lead the best of us into nonsense, and caused him to neglect cases where deliberate skill and creativity go into the production of verbal humour.

He does, indeed, draw a distinction between the comic, where we laugh at the speaker, and the witty, which is laughing with him at a third party. But he does not develop it. He also makes promising references to a deranged but persuasive 'logic', that figures in both humour and dreams. He suggests that we may be tempted to play along with this as a relaxation from the rigours of reality. Again, not much is made of this; presumably because it does not fit well with his official doctrine that humour is founded in inflexibility.

Bergson's second theme concerns the social function of laughter. This, surprisingly, is held to be conservative: a way of bringing the deviant and eccentric into line by mocking their peculiarities. What makes this strange is the fact that, behind Bergson's view of laughter, lies his general, dualistic distinction between free mind or spirit and determined mechanical matter. One would have expected this to have encouraged him to see humour as an assertion of freedom and spontaneity, not only against the determined regularities of nature, but against the routines of conventional society too. It is evidently possible to laugh at those who mechanically go through the social drills; and Bergson himself is prepared to laugh at the rigidities of professionals of one sort or another. But he nevertheless seems unwilling to allow that humour might be a liberating, mould-breaking force.

I do not know how to explain this. Conceivably he took a remarkably favourable view of the prevailing social order, perhaps thinking that to obey the laws laid down by society is to be free. But I do not know that he did, and find it hard to see how anybody really could, unless he had an ideal, not an actual, society in mind. I have to confess that I cannot really make sense of Bergson at this point.

It is, however, interesting to see how Sartre, who closely follows Bergson, deals with it. His line is that Bergson is right about the object of humour; but that he has failed properly to elucidate its social aspect. Sartre is aware that one might expect the likes of him and Bergson, upholders of freedom as they are, to see laughter as an assault on 'seriousness', bourgeois conformism, that is. Quite the contrary, however, claims Sartre, it is really an aspect of it. The truth is that accidents and absurdities constitute threats to our seriousness - to our confidence in social routines - which threats we seek to defuse by laughing at them. Bergson's assimilation of the 'logics' of humour and dreaming fits in well with Sartre's doctrines concerning imagination and the emotions. Accordingly he sees laughter as an attempt in imagination to 'derealise' threats to our seriousness. It is less an expression

of freedom than a neurotic evasion of it.

I was directed to this strange material, which comes from the first volume of the *Idiot of the Family*, by the philosopher Peter Caws (Sartre, 1979). According to him, Sartre also recognises the possibility of a liberating sort of laughter, which may be realised when we laugh at ourselves. I cannot pretend to have succeeded in seeing more than the merest hint of this in the passages of the *Idiot* that I have read: but I do not claim acquaintance with more than the odd nook and cranny of that monstrous book. It has been pointed out, too, that Sartre laughs at the seriousness of the bourgeoisie in the considerably earlier *Nausea*.

Incongruity Theories

Bergson had, of course, a philosophical axe to grind in his discussion of humour, but it is very much to his credit that he still managed to give considerable attention to the phenomena themselves. With Kant and Schopenhauer, however, axe grinding is the principal activity, though both manage a few jokes.

Kant's discussion occurs in the short section 54 of the aesthetic section of his *Critique of Judgement*. It is the association of humour with comedy and related literary forms that leads Kant to discuss it, as in effect an appendix to his aesthetics. His line is that laughter is induced by an agreeable play of sensations that does not amount to thinking. Music is similar in this respect. (Kant generally takes a lowish view of music, the least urbane of the arts, all too likely to invade the privacy of non-consenting auditors.) The gratification afforded by music and the humorous is primarily physical, involving movements of the intestines, which lead to other bodily movements (vibrations of the diaphragm when we laugh) that are recreative and conducive to health. In music certain auditory sensations provoke aesthetic ideas, which in their turn provoke further sensations. In humour, however, it begins the other way round, with absurd or incongruous ideas provoking sensations.

I will say no more about Kant's conception of musical appreciation, except that his emphasis on its, and humour's, physical aspects seems to reflect a desire to concede to the Epicureans that there is a sensory fringe to aesthetics, whilst insisting that its heartlands are entirely disinterested. I will look rather at Kant's contention that the object of humour is a sort of unobviously absurd idea that raises an expectation which then suddenly shatters. I am not sure how much his illustrations help, though examples

are such rare things in Kant that it would be ungrateful not to attend to them. The first is this: an Indian at an Englishman's table in Surat saw a bottle of ale opened, and all the beer turned into froth and flowed out. The repeated exclamations of the Indian showed his great astonishment. 'Well, what is so wonderful in that?' asked the Englishman. 'Oh, I'm not surprised myself,' said the Indian, 'at its getting out, but at how you managed to get it all in the first place.' (I think we are meant to laugh at the incongruous idea that beer bottles are filled by compressing froth. Hobbes would, presumably, hold that we laugh at the Indian's naivety.) The second example is of the heir of an unpopular wealthy man, who complains that he cannot arrange an appropriately respectful funeral: the more he pays mourners to look sad, the happier they become. The third example begins with Kant reporting that he cannot laugh at stories of people's hair turning white overnight - cannot laugh, it appears, not because he has heard it too often before, but because he thinks it never happens. But he is prepared to laugh at the sad story of a bewigged merchant, who was so perturbed at seeing his cargo jettisoned in a storm that his wig turned white.

Perhaps the most obvious comment is that these stories would excite less interest if they did not come from so great a philosopher. Clearly, Kant's view is different from Hobbes' and Bergson's. What he thinks provokes laughter is the reasonably subtle build up to an astonishing conjunction of two disparate ideas. (The shaggy dog story is, perhaps, not a counterexample, since it is plainly parasitic on the Kantian style joke being taken to be the norm, and scores by the absence of the expected climax.) For Kant there is no requirement that anybody be triumphed over, or that what is laughed at should be fixed and unchangeable. But, unfortunately, there is very little explanation of what the required incongruity between ideas is supposed to be. It is very surprising that such a rationalist fails to make it clear whether he thinks the absurdities that generate humour are logical or factual.

This, anyway, is Schopenhauer's criticism; and he undertakes to elucidate the sort of incongruity involved - without examples in the first volume of *The World as Will and Idea*, though with some in the considerably later second volume. 'In every case', he writes in Volume I, section 13, 'laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation. . . All laughter therefore is occasioned by a paradoxical, and hence unexpected, subsumption; it matters not whether this

is expressed in words or deeds. This in brief is the correct explanation of the ludicrous'.

So, the foundation of humour is some misalignment between concept and object, or at any rate a gross misalignment. (Schopenhauer thinks there must always be some discrepancy between rational concept and perceived object - indeed his interest in laughter derives from his seeing it as a striking manifestation of this great metaphysical truth. It also explains for him the widely held belief that animals are incapable of humour: lacking reason, they cannot have concepts which might fail to fit objects.) Schopenhauer seems to think that concepts can get out of line with objects in two ways: either the concept demands too much of the object or the object is too much for the concept. This seems to be the foundation, though he does not put it this way, for the distinction between wit and folly. Wit is when we consciously apply a concept to an object which does not measure up to it - an example perhaps being Sartre's remark in *Words* that his father hurriedly begat him and took refuge in death. Death evidently is not a refuge; but one of the many things we seek refuge from. In a similar vein Sartre also tells of a man jumping into the water to get shelter from the rain. Folly, by contrast, is when an agent does something that fails to satisfy his concept of what he is about - Don Quixote tilting at windmills is the obvious example. These examples are not, indeed, Schopenhauer's, since he gives none in Volume I.

When, in the second volume, he deigns to supply examples, he cites the grave in the hospital cemetery, where the great surgeon lies like a hero, surrounded by the corpses of those he has slain. This is evidently meant to be wit. I cannot, however, say that I am entirely persuaded that either Kant or Schopenhauer does enough to explain why incongruity and absurdity, that unquestionably often figure as objects of humour, are found to be funny. Kant thinks that they somehow suggest play, as opposed to toilsome reality; and both make much of expectations being first raised and then suddenly lowered, but this can happen in cases where incongruity and absurdity do not come in at all.

Release Theories

I have not left myself much space for these: and I am less sure of my ground. I mentioned Aristotle and Freud in this connection. As regards the former, I was intrigued by Richard Janko's conjectural reconstruction of Aristotle's account of comedy (*Aristotle on Comedy*, 1984), which is, of course, missing from what we now have of the *Poetics*. As I understand the

scholarly situation, Janko is felt to be stronger in conjecture than in verification. Be this as it may, there is at least a pleasing symmetry in the thought that Aristotle in the *Poetics* answered both of Plato's complaints against the poets in the *Republic*: namely, that tragedy arouses the dangerous emotions of pity and fear, whilst comedy arouses shamefully loutish laughter. In his extant account of tragedy there is no doubt that Aristotle argues that tragedy arouses pity and fear only in order harmlessly to discharge them. Why should he not in the lost book have made a corresponding claim about comedy and the buffoonish emotions?

Freud's line in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) is different. It is not that joking helps us to discharge otherwise damaging emotions; more that we unconsciously exploit humour, and indeed also dreams, in order to express socially unacceptable feelings and attitudes - usually sexual in a wide sense of the term - in a disguised way, thus outwitting the repressive Super-Ego. (As was noted above, humour and dreams are associated by Bergson and Sartre too.) It is a marked difference between the Aristotelian and Freudian views that self-deception is not essential to the former. Conceivably, naïve playgoers do not understand why they enjoy the theatre; but those who do understand need enjoy it no less. But self-deception is central in Freud. You cannot in full self-consciousness deceive your Super-Ego. It ought to follow on this view that people's interest in humour diminishes as they progress towards self-awareness; but I do not know whether this implication is acknowledged, or indeed whether it is true.

There is no doubt that humour can be exploited in order to insinuate otherwise unacceptable content, though it need not be exclusively sexual. Political and social criticism may gain expression this way, which is sometimes institutionally licensed, and not only in the crudely transparent shape of the court jester. At the personal level, too, unpalatable truths are often unoffendingly conveyed under the cover of humour.

Humour, then, can serve as a social sweetener, but it is hard to believe this to be the whole story about it: in fact it could not be. Humour must, so to say, be there in its own right, before it can be exploited. It must charm of itself, before it can be pressed into the service of release or communication. Freud seems to have realised this, inasmuch as he recognised a sort of 'harmless wit', which pleased of itself, as distinct from the 'tendentious wit', which he supposed to be at the service of the unconscious. The release theory consequently lacks generality in so far as it gives no account of

harmless wit. Freud seems to have regarded the latter as a matter of playing with ideas and words.

Possibly there is a starting-point for another theory of humour here. I certainly make no claim that the three types of theory considered exhaust the field. I have used them simply as rough indications of the sorts of opinions that have been expressed by philosophers.

A Theory of Humour

I have used up my space on the rather easy project of reporting what some theories of humour assert, putting off the harder and much neglected task of specifying what a philosophical theory of humour might be. What can reasonably be expected of a theory of humour?

First of all it ought to cover a great proportion of the cases commonly regarded as cases of humour. A respectable theory accordingly presupposes a great deal more systematic phenomenological spadework than philosophers have usually put in - Bergson is an honourable exception here. This may be less of a problem for physiologists and psychologists. Once they have identified physiological or psychological 'entities', they can legitimately concentrate on them, without worrying how representative or important they are in common talk and thought. To be sure, philosophers themselves, when discussing humour, not infrequently offer physiological and psychological observations - Kant himself is strangely concerned with the intestines and diaphragm. But this can hardly be their proper work. This must rather be with the object of humour, the humorous or the laughable. The philosophical task is to tell us what an object has to be thought of as being if it is to count as funny, to specify the proper objects of humour.

What people in fact laugh at is a pointer to this; but not the whole story, since it is possible to be amused by what is not funny. There is no lack of inappropriate mirth.

Humour may not be a central case of emotion; but, to a degree, it conforms to the general emotional pattern. The pattern typically involves: (i) certain mental and physical elements (in the case of fear these include anxiety, trembling, sweating); (ii) the direction of attention to an object that is conceived in an appropriate way (the object of fear has to be thought of as dangerous); and (iii) a characteristic behavioural tendency (in the case of fear, flight). The first two elements are plainly present in the case of humour, though it is perhaps not so clear what the behavioural element

might be. Here humour resembles the aesthetic emotions generally, and tends to be discussed alongside them when it is discussed at all. It is, however, primarily the second element that is the concern of philosophy. Complications are possible. Fear, for example, is primarily of the dangerous; but it is, secondarily, possible to be afraid, of creatures, say spiders, which even the fearful do not think of as being actually dangerous. Similarly, it is necessary to cater for the possibility of being amused by what is not amusing, however that may be characterised in the end.

If this account of the role of philosophy is correct, then the superiority and incongruity theories would seem at least to be starters; but the release theory not. It is rather a view about the personal and social function of what is already taken to be humorous. It assumes, rather than attempts, the properly philosophical work. This, I should say, is not intended as a criticism of Freud in particular, since he gives a careful preliminary account of the concept of humour and of the various sub-types of it. One last, purely personal observation. I have been very struck by the extent to which the philosophers I have looked at have considered humour from, so to say, the consumer's point of view - what makes us laugh. This is, indeed, a feature of philosophical aesthetics generally; for which there is the excuse that few philosophers are producers of works of art. But one might suppose that even philosophers occasionally make jokes; and it seems to me that reflection on what we nearly all know has to be done to make people laugh might be a shorter route to the essence (or essences) of humour than the ones commonly followed. It seems to me too that, in many cases, the admiration and appreciation that informs our laughter is our practitioners' recognition of the skill of an accomplished jester, who, like skilled achievers in other fields, obtains great results with remarkable economy of means.

3—

Humour in the Bible?

Donald Murray

Firstly, two points in clarification of the title to this chapter. The 'Bible' referred to is the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, for two quite practical reasons: (1) this is the text with which I am most familiar, and in which I have some academic expertise; (2) in any case, the limits of space force me to concentrate on just two examples, both drawn from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.¹ The second point about the title of my paper concerns the question-mark. Its use does not indicate that I hold any lingering doubt that humour is to be found in the Bible. Rather it is intended to reflect the anticipated surprise of many readers at the title, and their doubts about the title's implications. For the role which the Bible has played in our society until fairly recent times - and which it still does within some parts of that society - is not conducive to the idea that it might contain humour. A gilt-edged book bound in black leather, with the title 'Holy Bible' embossed in gold lettering on its spine is not obviously proclaiming itself as a repository of humour. Nor is it to be supposed that Puritans, Pietists, Victorians, or their like, who prescribed its reading as the sole occupation of the sabbatarian Sunday, thought of it as a source of anything but deadly seriousness and high moral earnestness. If it is right to attribute an overall unitary purpose to the collection we know as the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, then we would have to agree that that purpose is both serious and moral. My contention is, however, that the achieving of such a purpose is compatible with a variety of means, among which humour takes its place. So that whereas, on the one hand, works like *Deuteronomy* or the 'Prophets' are unrelievedly serious and morally earnest, a *Ruth* or an *Esther*, on the other hand, can convey its moral message by comic vision and moments of humour.

But fictional romances like these are easily marginalised in a collection which owes its general character to the interests and outlook of a tightly-

knit and religiously earnest society ² determined to avoid the sins of the past, for which it sees itself as still paying the penalty. Thus a leading element in the collection that makes up the Hebrew Bible is an account³ of this society's past which highlighted these perceived sins and failures, interpreting lesser disasters as divine punishments for past wrongdoing, and which also served as warnings of ultimate disaster to come if the allegedly sinful conduct was persisted in. This account makes use of all kinds of traditional material of widely different origins and very variable historicity. The result, however, is a theological interpretation of the past of a national group, which evidently was one way in which this group represented its past to itself, and thus comes within the terms of the broad definition of history proposed by Huizinga.⁴ In what follows, one very small and one somewhat longer section of this account of the past of Israel will serve as examples of humour in history, with the term 'history' here being understood along the lines of Huizinga.

Before we turn to the specific texts I have in mind, there are two matters of analysis and definition I should clear out of the way first. One is the meaning of the overall title for this collection of articles, 'Humour and History'. I see three distinct but related ideas latent in this phrase.

(1) Humour is a factor in the historical process. What I have in mind here is the effect humour may have had on the course of events, e.g. as a crucial factor in relieving the tension of particularly fraught negotiations of high consequence. I have no example to offer from the Bible of humour in history in this particular sense.

(2) Humour may be found within the historical process: i.e. the discerning of elements of the comic in the way things go on and how they turn out. The events themselves are usually of serious consequence, certainly to the direct participants, and may also be so for the observer. None the less the observer is able to put a certain ironic distance between her/himself and the events in question which allow her/him to see the funny side of what happened.

(3) Humour can be part of historical narrative, where the narrative account of 'historical' events conveys elements of humour. This is normally a special case of (2), in that the author of the account has her/himself discerned humorous features in the events s/he narrates, and wishes to convey that to her/his audience. Moreover, the humour may serve a 'serious' purpose for narrator and intended

audience, as the vehicle of a particular message. We shall be more specific on this when we come to our biblical examples.

I have assumed for the nonce in discussing my third sense of 'humour and history' that the humour to be found in historical narrative was intended by its author. However, we are all sufficiently aware that in all kinds of situations the receiver of a communication may discern humour in it which attendant circumstances of the act of communication make abundantly clear was not intended by the communicator. The ineluctable gap between the understanding and experience of communicator and of recipient give scope for this. Further, the greater the gap the greater the scope is. Thus in the case of the Hebrew Bible the change in presuppositions and general understanding between its original authors and modern readers is such that the latter may well be disposed to see simply as funny things its authors regarded as deadly serious. Now whilst this particular form of 'humour in the Bible' might properly come within the terms of my title, I do not propose to pursue it here. I am much more interested in bringing to notice examples of humour in the Bible which I believe can with some certainty be regarded as intended by their authors.

I realise that this raises the now somewhat hoary issue of intentionality in literature, an issue the ramifications of which we cannot follow here.⁵ Suffice it to say that I regard it as a perfectly legitimate strategy of readers to approach a text as an act of communication between author and reader, in which the author intends to convey certain information and/or ideas to her/his reader. The reader reconstructs that intentionality through her/his reading of the text, working from the author's use of the conventions of writing. Assuming in both author and reader an adequate degree of competence in their roles, it is not unreasonable to suppose that there is an adequate match between what the reader reconstructs and what the author intended. Of course, in the case of an ancient text written in a foreign language the reader has to work hard at gaining adequate competence. In what follows I shall strive to provide sufficient information to make the reader adequate to the task of seeing the humour intended in the texts we shall now examine.

My first example is a text found in *Judges*, 3:12-30:⁶

¹²The Israelites once more did wrong in the eyes of Yahweh. Yahweh caused Eglon king of Moab to prevail over Israel, because they did wrong in his eyes.

¹³Eglon allied himself with the Ammonites and Amalekites, attacked Israel, and took possession of the city of palms.

¹⁴The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.

¹⁵Then the Israelites appealed in penitence to Yahweh, who provided them a deliverer, one Ehud, son of Gera, the Benjaminite, a man 'restricted in the use of his right hand' [i.e. a left-hander]. The Israelites sent by him [lit. 'by his hand'] tribute to Eglon king of Moab.

¹⁶Ehud made himself a double-edged sword, about eighteen inches in length, which he strapped on under his clothes on his right thigh.

¹⁷He brought the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Eglon was a very fat man.

¹⁸After the presentation of the tribute was finished, Ehud led away the tribute-bearers on their return journey,

¹⁹but at the sculptured stones [?'idols] near Gilgal he returned (to the king). He said, 'I have a matter of secrecy for you, O king'. The latter said, 'Give (us) privacy'; so all his attendants left him. ²⁰Ehud came to him as he was sitting alone in his cool upper room and said to him, 'It is a message from God that I have for you', whereupon the king rose from his seat.

²¹Ehud reached out his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king's belly.

²²The hilt went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the weapon, such that Ehud did not withdraw the sword from the king's belly. Then the faeces seeped out. ⁷

²³Ehud went out by the gallery(?). He shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

²⁴Just as he had gone the king's servants arrived to find the doors of the upper room locked. They said, 'He must be relieving himself in the cool room'.

²⁵So they waited until they felt embarrassed, but he still did not open the doors. Then they took a key and opened up, to find their master lying on the floor, dead.

²⁶Ehud got away while they delayed: he reached the sculptured stones, and escaped to Seirah.

²⁷When he arrived he blew the ram's horn in the hill country of

Ephraim, and Israelites went down from the mountains under his leadership.

²⁸He said to them, 'Follow me, for Yahweh has given your enemies the Moabites into your hand.' So they went down after him and secured the fords of the Jordan against Moab, so that no-one could cross.

²⁹They dealt a decisive blow to Moab at that time, killing about ten thousand men, all of them strong and sleek; none got away.

³⁰Thus was Moab subjected to Israel on that day; and the land had rest for forty years.

This is one of a series of 'stories of the deliverers or "judges"' from which the book takes its name. The stories purport to narrate incidents in the early history of Israel, before it became a monarchic state, when as a rather fragmented people still establishing its hold on territory in Palestine, it was subject to harassment and oppression by neighbouring and competing groups. These stories have been provided with a uniform setting, rather like a series of snapshots in an album, all framed alike, whatever the subject, the composition, or the original purpose of the picture. The framework sets all the stories into the general theological interpretation of Israel's past, as instances of national apostasy which incurred divine punishment in the form of external oppression. Oppression provoked national repentance and supplication, which itself elicited deliverance through a divinely-appointed saviour. This is a very high-minded and deadly serious treatment of the 'stories of the judges', whose cumulative effect is doubtless meant to be a powerful warning of the folly of apostasy from Yahweh, and the efficacy of returning to loyalty to him. Yet a reading which is attentive to each narrative shows the collection to be more varied in subject, in composition, and in what would appear to be the individual purposes of the constituent narratives than their present uniform setting would suggest. In the example before us, it will soon become apparent that this setting imposes earnestness on a narrative that is full of a facetious playfulness.

Indeed, the serious frame of mind the reader has been put into by the standard introduction in 3:12-15a ⁸ is likely to cause her/him to miss the first hint of playful humour in 3:15, where we are introduced to the protagonist, Ehud, as a Benjamite and a left-hander. The Hebrew expression for left-hander here is literally 'restricted as to his right-hand', a typical piece of

oppressive 'handedism' from the right-handed majority! But in the context there is also a playful reference to Ehud's identification as a Benjaminite, since Benjamin literally means 'son of the right hand', and thence 'Southerner', from the Israelite convention of designating compass points from an eastward orientation.⁹ So we have a dweller on the right hand, who does not use his right hand.

The next touch of humour comes in the last phrase of v. 15, where we are told that Ehud is sent to take the tribute Israel must pay to their current oppressor. 15b says literally 'Israel sent *by his hand* tribute to Eglon, king of Moab'. The expression 'by the hand of' is a standard Hebrew way of saying 'by means of', 'through the person of', and attention would not normally be drawn to its literal sense, any more than to equivalent metaphorical or metonymical forms of expression in any language. But having just been told that Ehud was 'restricted as to his right *hand*', i.e. the normal fighting hand, the phrase 'by his hand' here invites the right-handed majority to the slick conclusion that the left-hander is not much use for anything except submission.

But v. 16 belies this by telling us that this man 'restricted in (the use of) his right hand' is 'handy' enough to make himself a double-edged short sword, which he girds on his right side, under his outer garment, 'handy' for a left-handed draw. Retrospectively, the seemingly innocuous 'tribute by his hand' in v. 15 takes on a sinister(!) import which injects black comedy into the ensuing plot development.

Without further ado the official tribute is taken to Eglon, king of Moab, who, 17b informs us, is very fat. Now fat people, particularly very fat people, are pretty universally regarded as comic figures for no other reason than their fatness, and that prepossession is in point here. But further, in its context the statement of Eglon's fatness invites the reflection that he has grown fat on the tribute the Israelites are forced to pay him. Thus the oppressed have gained a kind of comic revenge on their oppressor, by turning him into a figure of ridicule. Moreover, the context of 17b imparts further black humour to the narrative, through the conjunction of the adjective 'fat' and the name 'Eglon'. For 'Eglon' resembles the Hebrew word for calf,¹⁰ and calves fattened for slaughter by a special diet were considered a great delicacy. Eglon is being set up as the absurd victim in a macabre comedy.

The tribute delivered, Ehud first sees the rest of his party back to safety,

then returns alone to Eglon's court claiming to have a confidential 'matter' to broach with the king. The strongly unilinear and compressed nature of biblical narrative is very apparent here: where we would look for some circumstantial detail to account for the readiness of Eglon to accept Ehud's explanation of his return, even to the extent of granting him a private audience, the narrative sticks strictly to the dramatic business.¹¹ But the narrative's obsession with sticking to the point can still find room for sinister humour. Ehud's expression for 'confidential matter' in v. 19 plays upon an alternative construction of it as 'something hidden',¹² a piece of irony made grimly humorous by Eglon's guileless reaction to Ehud's statement. This ironic humour is deepened, at any rate for the original Israelite audience, when Ehud adverts to the matter a second time in v. 20 as a 'message/something from God' for the king. On hearing this, Eglon rises from his throne, presumably as a mark of respect for the deity, but in the black humour of the piece he is the fatted calf innocently presenting himself to the slaughterer.

With Ehud's *coup de main* the comedy turns from the sinister to the low. He reaches with his unthreatening left hand inside his clothing to bring forth the divine message for Eglon, secreted on the auspicious right side of his body, and plunges the sword into the flab of Eglon's fat belly. So little resistance does Ehud's thrust meet in the soft tissue of the pampered king that the whole sword, hilt and all, is buried in his flesh.¹³ Moreover, the wound releases the waste products of all the king's high living at the Israelite's expense: out seep the faeces.

This lavatory humour is developed to grotesquely humorous proportions in the following scene. Ehud evacuates the room, locking the doors behind him. No sooner has he gone than the servants, earlier dismissed from the private interview, return to attend their master. Finding the door locked, they ironically assume the king is relieving himself,¹⁴ and wait. No doubt used to this over-indulgent king's necessity, they wait; and wait; and wait, until they grow embarrassed at the length of the period apparently needed for the king's relief. Fetching a key to unlock the door, they find their master dead on the floor: he has achieved the final and endless relief from all his over-indulgence!

There is more than a little reason to see the narrating of Ehud's escape to safety in v. 26 as an original conclusion to the narrative.¹⁵ Certainly the final episode is completely devoid of the vein of humour that has run

through the narrative to this point, and thus need not detain us here. This ending seems designed the better to adapt the rather scurrilous story of Ehud to the framework interpretation as a story of Israel's deliverance from oppression.

The foregoing should suffice to demonstrate not only that there is humour in this story, but that its humour constitutes a large part of its *raison d'être*: not only how it was told but also why it was told. Whether or not we are disposed to allow ourselves to find it funny, depends on our prepossessions, prepossessions very different from those of the original narrator and his target audience. But at least now we cannot fail to recognize that it was intended to be humorous, and, recognizing this, we must ask why the mode of low humour was used. ¹⁶ One may suggest that telling it with broad humour gave the story popular appeal as a morale-booster for Israelites still subject to the depredations of oppressive enemies. The oppressor is made less threatening, his power is deprecated, by turning him into a figure of fun, and the farcical ease with which he is bested reassures the oppressed as to ultimate victory. As some sort of a modern analogy, though on a very different scale, one need only recall how during the Second World War humorists presented dictators as ridiculous figures, a genre that remained popular for some time after their defeat, even when the full horrors perpetrated by them became known.

The parallel extends to the question of historicity also, for, just as in Hitler caricatures, so in this ancient example of 'humour in history', little more than the broad outline of character and events can be taken as historical. In this instance probably no more than that a Benjaminite called Ehud was known to have assassinated a Moabite king, which success may have triggered a more organised attempt by Benjaminites and others to throw off Moabite domination. The rest belongs to the clever, if at times scurrilous, imagination of the narrator. What we have here is a genre which, in our terms, is as much fictional as historiographical, if not more so. ¹⁷ The spirit which animates it has little to do with that of von Ranke's immortalized phrase *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; rather perhaps *wie es mag gewesen sein* or even *wie es soll gewesen sein*. Yet it should not be lost sight of that this is still fictionalised history in the sense that it re-presents an event believed to have happened in the real world at a past time. The strength of its appeal to the Israelite audience lay in its claim to be telling part of the story of their past. Further, the use made of the narrative in the

wider context of the stories of the judges also depends upon persuading Israel that their past has lessons for their present and their future. With the minimum of adaptation a humorous narrative told to maintain morale is turned into a solemn warning on maintaining a right relationship with Yahweh.

If my first example of humour in the Bible deals with a quite minor figure and a relatively peripheral incident in Israel's story of its past, the second comes much more to the heart of the matter. It is the story of the eponymous ancestor himself, Israel, known mostly as Jacob in the relevant chapters of *Genesis*, 27 - 33.¹⁸ Compared to the highly concentrated narrative in *Judges* we have just examined, this is a more leisurely, a more sprawling narration, and its humour is less hectic. It is the humour of comic vision, the tolerant and amused account of the vicissitudes of a rogue, a twister who is himself twisted by another in a mirror image of his own deception, yet outrageously contrives to come out on top, only to find that his original fraud was of himself. Moreover, in the course of narrating this sinuous plot the humorous potential of the individual episodes which make up the story is exploited. But, as so often in the Hebrew Bible, the germ of the narrative lies in reflection on the meaning of the name Jacob, which is associated with a Hebrew word meaning 'insidious, deceitful'. Already the role of fictional imagination seems to be prevailing over that of strict history.

The younger of twins, Jacob is delineated as soft and feminine in relation to his aggressively masculine brother Esau: the latter is hairy, a man of field and forest, his father Isaac's kind of man; whereas the former is smooth-skinned, a denizen of the settlement, and favourite of his mother Rebekah.¹⁹ She it is who dreams up a farcical scheme to trick the now blind Isaac into bestowing on her favourite the potent patriarchal blessing, at the expense of the rightful recipient, the elder Esau. This involves the quick slaughtering and cooking of a couple of goats, to forestall Esau in his longer task of hunting and cooking wild game, and the decking out of Jacob in the goatskins, to give him the palpable hairiness of his brother (27:1-17). The latter ploy is Rebekah's practical response to the only objection Jacob raises to his mother's plot: that Isaac might, by touching him, recognize in him the smooth-skinned Jacob (27:11). Now Isaac, who has kept goats all his life might be expected to know goat's hair from human hair when he feels it, as well as to taste the difference between a

dish of goat's flesh and one of the wild game which he had sent Esau to hunt and prepare for him. Furthermore, Isaac recognises in the professed Esau the voice of Jacob. More than enough evidence of the attempted deception, one might think. Yet slow-witted Isaac seems unequal to the task, and in the face of Jacob's blatant lie in answer to Isaac's direct question 'are you really Esau' (27:24), he allows himself to be persuaded and duly bestows the blessing (27:18-29).²⁰

One particular feature of the blessing is worth more than a moment's attention, both because it is comically ironic in the immediate context, and because it resonates with comic irony in the later stages of the narrative, when Jacob prepares to meet his brother Esau after a twenty-year parting. Isaac confers on the Esau-who-is-Jacob dominion over his brothers:²¹ 'be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you' (27:29). The point is dwelt upon, by the fact of Isaac's later reprising it to Esau-who-is-Esau (27:37). Now the Hebrew word translated 'lord' here occurs only in these words of Isaac, but it is related to other common words which denote manly strength and prowess.²² Thus dominion through manly prowess, thoroughly appropriate to the real Esau, the man's man, is ludicrously bestowed upon the pretend Esau, Jacob, the mummy's boy. When the Esau-who-is-Esau returns, belated and all unknowing, to present his father with the dish of game and claim the blessing, the situation turns into farce (27:30-40). The blessing once bestowed cannot be recalled, and poor old Isaac, in response to Esau's plaintive appeals²³ 'bless me too, father' (27:34), 'haven't you kept any blessing for me?' (27:36), and 'have you only got one blessing?' (27:38), is at first completely nonplussed, but finally manages to find a pretty ambivalent sort of blessing for Esau, a real goat-wearing-sheepskin kind of blessing (27:39f), promising at most some future relief from his brother's domination. It remains to be seen how effective in the event Isaac's blessings will have been.

Indeed, the immediate sequel shows a Jacob who is anything but masterful in relation to his brother Esau. It falls to the resourceful and manipulative Rebekah - the archetypal Jewish momma - on learning that the defrauded Esau feels murderous towards his brother, to get Jacob out of harm's way by packing him off for a short holiday with her brother Laban in upper Mesopotamia, where incidentally he might find a suitable bride (27:41-45). She nags her husband Isaac into agreeing by her incessant complaints about Esau's foreign wives (27:46-28:5; cf. 26:34f). Esau, no

quicker-witted than his father, but feeling aggrieved with his parents over his treatment, at last cottons on to the fact that marrying *shiqsahs* really gets to his parents so he ups and marries another (28:6-9). ²⁴

As the eponymous ancestor of the Israelites, Jacob is hardly a model of the pious Yahwist. This is not primarily a matter of questionable ethics, but rather of personal commitment. For so far as he is concerned Yahweh is simply Isaac's god (cf. 'Yahweh your God' 27:20). However, on his way to the distant abode of Laban, Jacob has an unexpected dream-encounter with Yahweh, evidently provoked by his use of a stone as a pillow (28:10-19)! In the dream Yahweh makes promises of descendants and land²⁵ to Jacob, just as he had made to his father and grandfather before him (28:13f). More to the immediate point, he undertakes to be with Jacob in his journey and his stay in foreign parts (28:15); in effect to protect and prosper him. Unsolicited and unconditional as this divine undertaking is, Jacob is unable to believe that Yahweh is offering him something for nothing, and so instead proposes him a bargain whose stakes are not so high: Jacob will settle for food to eat, clothes to wear, and a safe return, for which he offers to make Yahweh his god and to pay a tithe to the sanctuary to Yahweh that Jacob promises to establish at Bethel, the site of the dream (28:20-22). A wry comment on the Jewish businessman as known to the narrator?

Without further ado Jacob arrives in Mesopotamia and quickly falls in with his relatives (29:1-12). Laban's welcome of Jacob is effusively openhearted (29:13-14a),²⁶ but this does not prevent him from getting a month's free labour from his nephew (29:14b-15a). Clearly wanting to keep the services of Jacob indefinitely, Laban invites Jacob to name his terms: seven years' work for the hand in marriage of Laban's beautiful younger daughter, Rachel. Despite having an older and less comely daughter, Leah, to marry off, who both custom and self-interest demanded should be married first, Laban agrees to the bargain (29:15b-19). The narrative betrays nothing of Laban's inner thoughts at this point. Was Laban even then planning to trick Jacob, or is the narratee invited to calculate that with seven years before Rachel's promised marriage, Laban might still get Leah fixed up first? However that may be, the seven years passed in honest service of Laban seem like a few days²⁷ for Jacob, who has fallen for Rachel in a big way (29:20).

Now the narrative works its mirror-image comic twist. The twister

Jacob, who by farcical means deceived his own father in order to defraud his elder brother of his due, becomes the dupe of a plausible ruse employed by Rachel's father in order to defraud him of the agreed wages due to him (the hand of Rachel), thereby giving her older sister Leah her due of marrying first. Leah is substituted for the expected Rachel as the heavily veiled bride, and when morning light reveals all it is too late (29:21-25a)! The poetic justice of the deception perpetrated on Jacob is underlined by Laban's invoking as sufficient explanation, when challenged by Jacob, the time-honoured right of the elder daughter (29:25b-26). The irony is the greater for Laban's being quite oblivious of the full import of his words. Jacob's bargain with Laban having thus fallen apart, the best he can do is to renegotiate it, agreeing to serve another seven years for Rachel. But at least this time he gets paid in advance: Rachel is given to him a week after his forced marriage to Leah (29:27-30).

At the end ²⁸ of his second period of service Jacob is not unnaturally anxious to take his wives and his family and return whence he came (30:25f). But Laban is as anxious not to lose the service of Jacob, not to mention the potential service of his growing family, and so he once again invites Jacob to name his price for continuing to work for him (30:27f). One might have thought that the last thing Jacob wanted was another bargain with Laban. But Jacob sees an opportunity to turn the tables on Laban with a bit of 'honest' trickery. He stipulates that his payment will consist of the spotted and the speckled, the striped and the banded among the flocks.²⁹ This way any cheating on his part would be easily detectable (30:29-33). To this Laban readily agrees, both because such marked animals were in any case a minority, and also because he can quickly remove the possible candidates from the flocks under Jacob's care, thus once again cheating him of his agreed reward (30:34-36).³⁰ The resourceful Jacob is not so easily thwarted, however: he elaborates a device of sympathetic magic with peeled sticks, which induces mating animals to produce spotted and banded young (30:37-43). Now here we will have to admit that our lack of knowledge of the prepossessions of the narrator and his target audience makes for uncertainty, but I will hazard the opinion that people who had been involved in sheep- and goat-breeding for generations were unlikely to take this too seriously, and, further, that they were not expected to. It was all part of the joke³¹ at Laban's expense: this time he was not going to get the better of Jacob.

Jacob's success in 'defrauding' Laban of most of his flocks by 'honest' means earns him a new set of enemies: Laban and his sons (31:1f). Though his life has not been directly threatened, Jacob decides that a secret flight is advisable, which produces the comically unequal situation of a mightily encumbered Jacob (flocks, wives, and children) fleeing from an unencumbered pursuer (31:17-21). The only surprise is that it takes Laban three days to learn that Jacob is gone, and another seven to overtake him.³²

The story of Jacob and Laban now takes a further jocular twist. Unknown to Jacob, Rachel has stolen the images of her father's household gods,³³ and is carrying them in her camel saddle (31:19, cf. 34). Their theft presents Laban with a serious charge to bring against the fleeing Jacob. So once again through the machinations of a woman dear to him Jacob has by deception (in this instance hers, not his) gained something of doubtful value to him, but which the rightful possessor values more than the life of the purported thief! When Laban confronts Jacob, he first plays the injured father and grandfather, berating Jacob for not allowing him to say a fond farewell to his kith and kin, nor to throw them a leaving party. He then hints at the mailed fist in the velvet glove, telling Jacob that he has been restrained from using his power to harm Jacob by the intervention of Jacob's father's god.³⁴ Finally Laban gets to the accusation over the stolen gods (31:26-30). In reply to this onslaught Jacob cravenly stutters something about being afraid of Laban. But Laban's final accusation gives him the chance to save face. In his duped ignorance Jacob vehemently protests innocence, and protests so recklessly that he puts in jeopardy the life of his beloved Rachel by threatening death to anyone found to have the images (31:31f). However, the ways of women come to the rescue of Rachel and of Jacob. It happens to be the time of the month for Rachel, which gives her a plausible excuse not to rise from the camel saddle on which she is sitting when Laban makes his search of the camp (31:33-35).

Laban's failure to substantiate his accusation of theft turns the tables. Now it is Jacob who is all bluster: out comes a torrent of accusations about Laban's underhand cheating of him over the past twenty years, wherein Laban had changed his wages ten times in an attempt to defraud him. Jacob's own conduct on the other hand had been a model of probity (31:36-42)! Laban's only response to this is to reiterate a rather dubious claim to proprietorial rights over his married daughters, and then to offer Jacob a compromise. A border is marked between the sphere of Laban and the

sphere of Jacob, a non-aggression pact entered into, and Laban gets to take his fond farewell of his daughters and grandchildren after all (31:43-55).³⁵

Thus ends after twenty years the visit of our comic hero to his maternal uncle, a visit conceived of by his mother as a short stay out of harm's way, until his brother's murderous anger against him should subside. Yet at the end of it it is Laban who menaces him with life-threatening physical force (31:29). But, thanks to divine intervention (31:24,29), Jacob comes out of the encounter intact, and with more than just the food to eat and clothes to wear of his original bargain with Yahweh (28:20-22). The escape from Laban, however, brings him back close to Esau, the elder brother of erstwhile murderous intent. Though much has happened to Jacob in the intervening years, his perception of Esau remains frozen to the time he fled from him in fear of his life twenty years before.³⁶

Rather than endure the agonised suspense of waiting to see whether and what his brother would do, and probably calculating that a bold approach offered a better chance of reconciliation, Jacob sends a request for a meeting to Esau, now a powerful sheik in the land of Edom. The forms of Jacob's message (32:4f) are very revealing, and imbued with comic irony in relation to the stolen blessing of Isaac, the prime cause of Esau's ill-feeling towards his brother. That reputedly irrevocable paternal benediction purported to make the Esau-who-was-Jacob 'lord' over his 'brothers' (27:29,37). Yet no sooner was the blessing uttered than this 'masterful' Jacob fled, at his mother's instigation, several hundred miles away from the murderous anger of his only brother! In the meantime both brothers have grown rich, but Esau has at his disposal what Jacob has not, a fighting troop. Jacob now, therefore, in great fear of his powerful brother, addresses him as 'my lord',³⁷ referring to himself as Esau's 'servant': in the event it is the Esau-who-was-Esau who gains the abject submission of his brother!³⁸

The news that Esau is actually coming to meet him with his band of four hundred men throws Jacob into panic, but he is still collected enough to split his own party into two, and to arrange as vanguard a sizable gift of herds for Esau, divided into several waves to achieve the maximum propitiatory effect (32:6-8, 13-21). Jacob also, for the first time in the narrative, resorts to prayer to Yahweh, god of his fathers Abraham and Isaac. This time he offers no bargain, but acknowledges the unmerited divine favour shown him, and claims protection on the basis of the divine promises he had previously ignored (32:9-12, cf. 28:13f,20f).³⁹ In dire

jeopardy, as he sees it, Jacob now invokes his destiny as grounds for deliverance.⁴⁰

When finally he comes face to face with his brother, Jacob's almost palpable apprehension turns him into a lackey, bowing seven times before Esau and addressing him in the fawning language of 'my lord - your servant' (33:1-3). In complete contrast, Esau's warm greeting of Jacob as 'my brother' (33:4-9) implicitly consigns the fraternal rivalry, and Jacob's servile approach, to oblivion. But Jacob remains suspicious, perhaps remembering uneasily the effusive welcome he had had from Laban twenty years since.⁴¹ Though Esau at first declines the present Jacob had sent on ahead for him, Jacob insists, terming it, with what must in the circumstances amount to conscious irony, 'my blessing' (33:9-11).⁴² Jacob's bad conscience, not any smouldering resentment he attributes to his brother, rakes up the past. The comedy in this final meeting of the brothers lies not only in the ironic belying of the destinies supposedly ineluctably set for the brothers by Isaac's blessings, but also in the way each brother falls back into the role cast for him at the outset of the narrative: simple and open-hearted Esau, forgetful of his earlier lesson that Jacob was synonymous with deception (27:36), accepting at face-value his brother's prevaricating words (33:13-15); Jacob, ever devious, all the time intending to flee as quickly as possible and as far as possible in the opposite direction (33:16-19). Flight is, after deceit, Jacob's main strategy for coping.

The story of Jacob is a biblical example of picaresque comedy, in which the 'hero' is an anti-hero whose success is very much in spite of himself. The audience feels a good-humoured indulgence toward, rather than any strong admiration for, the central figure Jacob. His success is ultimately referred to divine providence over one who is part of a wider divine plan in history, a plan in which Jacob becomes Israel, eponymous ancestor of Yahweh's people. Yet Jacob is a reluctant Yahwist, whose behaviour is hardly a model for his descendants to emulate. If anything, the ill-used Esau with his simple honesty gains the sympathy of the audience, who are bound to take pleasure in his emerging undefrauded in the end, and to think him better off apart from his devious brother.⁴³

What is striking about this story in comparison with the Ehud narrative is that the humour is largely at the expense, not of Israel's enemies or rivals, but of their revered ancestors.⁴⁴ Even the religiously central relationship of the forefather to Yahweh is presented in comic vein. But is

it history, even in the minimal degree in which the Ehud narrative qualifies? In this case there are even fewer grounds for affirming the historical existence of the central characters, let alone of the events that make up the story. At best, the patriarchal material in *Genesis* mediates traditions, largely if not exclusively oral, dating from many centuries before the story has assumed its present shape. Further, the foregoing has surely demonstrated that a fertile fictional imagination has constructed the picaresque comedy of Jacob. This is historicised fiction rather than fictionalised history,⁴⁵ and it can qualify as 'history' only on the most generous interpretation of Huizinga's definition. None the less, the story purports to tell Israel about its past, and in doing so it shows that, even at a point in their account to themselves of their past where you might expect them to be most serious, some at least in Israel could see the joke.

Notes

¹ I do not thereby imply that no humour is to be found in the New Testament, though I may venture here the lay observation that humour in the New Testament is confined to some desultory appearances in the sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. But any expansion on - or indeed contradiction of - that I leave to New Testament experts.

² I refer to the religious community founded in Jerusalem at the end of the sixth century BCE, by people whose religious outlook was nourished by the fundamentalism of the prophets and the 'Deuteronomistic school'.

³ I here speak of the narrative from *Genesis* to *2 Kings* as a single account. Whatever may be the genesis of this material, in the collection constituted by the Hebrew Bible it is intended to be read as such. Moreover, there has been an increasing tendency among scholars to suggest that the production of this unified account came about the same time as the founding of the Jerusalem community who found in it their story.

⁴ Huizinga 1963, especially p. 9: 'History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past'.

⁵ For a recent discussion in relation to the Hebrew Bible, see Sternberg (1985) pp.8ff.

⁶ The following translation is my own, and claims no more than adequacy to the needs of the ensuing discussion.

⁷ The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain, and the phrase has been taken as a garbled duplicate of the phrase that immediately follows in v. 23a, itself of uncertain meaning. However, the grotesque humour of the rendering given above is quite in keeping with the text as a whole.

⁸ The stereotyped framework introduction has as it were a blank for insertion of the identity of the oppressor in each individual story, in this case Eglon king of Moab. It is not at all clear why the Ammonites and Amalekites are joined with Eglon here (v. 13), since

they play no further part in the narrative. Moreover, the mention of his taking possession of the city of palms (v. 13b, usually identified with Jericho) suggests that Eglon's territorial gains were quite modest, amounting to part of the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. Characteristically, the framework treats a threat to the territory of one or two tribes as a major incident concerning all Israel.

⁹ Note that this also puts the dark and threatening North on the left-hand side.

¹⁰ Hebrew *'egel* compared with *'eglon*. Though the two words may be etymologically related, this is beside the point. To the speaker of Hebrew, each word is a form of the basic word-root *'gl*, and this perception allows the pun to be made.

¹¹ A possible part explanation is that the narrator assumes his target audience knows that Gilgal (the 'sculptured stones'/idols' near Gilgal) is a shrine. Thus to them Ehud's claim, having turned to go back to the king at precisely this spot, to bear a confidential divine oracle to the king is made plausible. However, what the narrative still has not fully explained to our satisfaction is why Eglon finds it plausible.

¹² The Hebrew *dabar*, used by Ehad in both vv. 19 and 20, basically means 'word', either as a single word, or a connected series of words, 'saying', 'discourse'. It has the derived sense 'matter', 'affair', and in certain contexts the indefinite sense of 'something'. Vv. 19 and 20 make ironic play on this ambiguity.

¹³ Sternberg p. 336 (cf. p. 333) invokes a Hebrew idiom, the use of the verb *'akal* 'eat' to denote a sword's destroying its victim, to suggest a rather complex ironic play on the voracious appetite of the fat king. However, since the verb *'akal* is never used in this narrative, so faint a resonance as Sternberg detects is not likely to have been intentional.

¹⁴ One commentator (Y. Kaufmann as reported by Alter, 1981 p. 39) has related this to v. 22b by claiming that the odour of the released faeces suggested this explanation of the locked doors to the servants. Attractive(!) as the suggestion is, it seems to me to require the reader to supply too much to the reading of the text for the connection to have been intentional.

¹⁵ Ehad's escape beyond the safe point already established by vv. 18b.19a makes a satisfactory denouement for the story; vv. 27ff return to the all-Israel perspective of the introductory framework in 3:12-15; it is not evident that the cloak-and-dagger Ehad of 16-26 would make the military leader of 27ff; the vein of low humour in 16-26 is suddenly cut across by one of deadly seriousness in 27ff.

¹⁶ I have had students who have reacted with shocked horror to the idea that the Bible could tell such a horrible story as funny. In this they have been in some respects anticipated by the Bible itself, for, as indicated, the introduction to the story predisposes the reader to treat the text very seriously, and the conclusion reinforces this note of moral earnestness. It appears as though the editor responsible for the present context of the story was either not alive to, or attempted to short-circuit, its scurrilous humour: to the seriousminded all things are deadly serious.

¹⁷ For discussion of the relation of biblical narrative to these modern categorizations see Alter 1981 Chapter 2, which tends to emphasize the fictional element while not discounting the historical; Sternberg 1985 pp. 23-34, 81ff, which not altogether convincingly argues for mutually exclusive categories, with the biblical belonging to the historical; and Patrick & Scult, 1990 Chapter 3, which proposes as more appropriate a

category of rhetorical history (essentially an historical account using the resources of rhetoric, including fictional embellishment, to persuade its audience to a certain course of action).

¹⁸ This text is unfortunately too long to reproduce here. The reader is referred to any of the standard translations, since the ensuing discussion will assume general familiarity with the story.

¹⁹ So already the exposition in *Gen* 25:24-28, which is presupposed in *Gen* 27ff.

²⁰ One is reminded of the way the aged David allows himself to be hoodwinked by Nathan and Bathsheba into naming Solomon as designated successor (*1 Kings* 1).

²¹ The Hebrew uses the plural, reinforced by the parallel 'brothers // your mother's sons', though in fact the story of Jacob only ever refers to one brother, the twin Esau.

²² Hebrew *gebîr* related to the adjective *gibbôr* 'strong, mighty', often used in the combination *gibbôr hayil* 'warrior'.

²³ Sternberg regards this narrative of the theft of the blessing as 'serious and pathetic' (Sternberg p. 164). But while the incident clearly offers scope for such treatment, this account does not present either Isaac or Esau in such a way as to engage our sympathies in their loss, but rather as the ridiculous victims of a ludicrous ploy.

²⁴ Commentators in general take a different line on this, not least because they assign 27:46 - 28:9 to a different source (P) from the preceding material in Chapter 27 (J), and interpret these verses independently of their present context. On this view, Esau is making a conciliatory gesture towards his parents by 'taking his example from Jacob' in marrying a relative, Nebaioth the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham's son and Isaac's half-brother (so recently Westermann, 1985 pp. 446,448). Not only does this read a lot into the very neutral and laconic report, 28:8f, it also ignores the clear estrangement of Ishmael, who was the son of an Egyptian woman Hagar and married an Egyptian, from the patriarchal household (cf. *Gen* 16:12; 21:20; 25:5f). Moreover, in the context in which 28:8f is now placed (the only context of which we have any definite knowledge) Esau has nothing to gain by conciliating his parents, especially his mother Rebekah, and every reason to wound them (her) further.

²⁵ Here somewhat obliquely, in the promise of the descendants spreading West and East, North and South. However, this shows the degree to which the promise of descendants logically implies that of land, contrary to much current analysis.

²⁶ Comic irony is in the making here, since Esau's greeting of Jacob on their eventual meeting in 33:4 is verbally strongly reminiscent of the present text. However, the expectations of each meeting fostered in the narrative are comically belied in the denouement.

²⁷ The expression 'a few days' (*yamîm 'ahadîm*) picks up with comic irony on the identical expression used by Rebekah to delimit the period of Jacob's stay with her brother Laban necessary for Esau's anger to abate (27:44; the expression occurs only once elsewhere, *Dan* 11:20). The seven years, which seemed 'like a few days' to Jacob, are clearly already much longer than Rebekah envisaged, and represent only the beginning of what soon becomes to Jacob a tedious sojourn.

²⁸ The narrative from 29:31 to 30:24, which I do not rehearse, is concerned with the rivalry between the two wives and the birth of 11 sons and one daughter to Jacob. Among other

matters of little concern here, the passage reinforces the portrait of Jacob, already limned in the story of the stolen blessing, as a figure susceptible to manipulation by the women in his life.

²⁹ The complexities of Jacob's designation of the animals which will constitute his wages, and their relationship to the known facts of sheep and goat husbandry, have engaged commentators over the centuries. To my mind the improbabilities of the account are simply an index of the narrator's playful humour, given the likelihood of considerable knowledge of these facts among his target audience (*contra* Westermann 1985 p.480).

³⁰ Westermann *ad loc* (1985 p. 482) unconvincingly takes 30:35f as a precautionary measure by Laban against the possibility of Jacob's cheating him. But everything in the relations of the pair heretofore points to Laban's loading the dice against Jacob.

³¹ However, the joke does not seem to have been seen by 31:5-13, words of Jacob to his wives, which attribute the production of spotted and banded young to the intervention of God, without reference to Jacob's device. This is an essay in 'demagification' of 30:37ff, where the device had been successful without any reference to the intervention of God. Jacob's words here also serve both to intensify the impression of Laban as a chiseller, and to heighten God's providential care of Jacob, by claiming that Laban had unilaterally altered Jacob's wages ten times since the agreement of 30:34, but still Jacob has come out ahead. Finally, Jacob's wives, acquiescing in Jacob's planned flight, confirm this view of their father, by accusing him of squandering their portion of the dowry acquired through Jacob's labour (31:14-16).

³² But that is in order to locate the confrontation in the Mizpah region of Gilead, which gives scope for playful references to the supposed meaning of these names: 31:45-49.

³³ It is not altogether clear whether more than one image is involved: though the word *teraphim* is plural in form, the usage in 1 Sam 19:13, 16 indicates singular reference there. On the other hand Laban ('*elohay*' 'my gods' 31:30, and so Jacob quoting him 30:32) almost certainly indicates plural reference in this passage, since '*elohim*' with singular reference in the Hebrew Bible is otherwise exclusive to the god of Israel. Further, the reason for Rachel's theft can only be conjectured. Speiser's explanation (Speiser, 1964 pp. 260f) in terms of an alleged Nuzi law, which bestowed legal entitlement to an estate on the possessor of its household gods, is no less speculative than his similar efforts elsewhere in Genesis, if in this instance more compatible with the narrative as it is. A more likely explanation is that Rachel wishes to ensure blessing on the new household through possession of the *teraphim*. In the event she is shown to put its happiness in jeopardy.

³⁴ True to his earlier bargain, his father's god has not yet become Jacob's god - not until he has returned safely to his erstwhile home, and clearly that is not yet guaranteed!

³⁵ This conclusion to the Jacob-Laban episode demonstrates, as will also the ensuing conclusion of the Jacob-Esau story, the complex interlocking of individual and representative perceptions of the leading characters. The border treaty in the territory of Gilead is most easily understood in the context of relations between Israelite and Aramean groups, a point emphasised by the juxtaposing of Aramaic and Hebrew names in 31:47. However, whilst some other details in the narrative, such as the veiled threat of force by Laban, may have significance in this context, for the most part the story reads as the picaresque adventures of an individual hero in interaction with other individuals.

³⁶ The retentive and alert listener/reader will be aware that all this time the promised word (27:45) has not come from Rebekah to Jacob to tell him that his brother's anger has abated. In this way, despite the lapse of time, Jacob's fear is additionally motivated.

³⁷ This is Hebrew *'adonî*, the normal form of address to a superior, not the term *gebîr* used in 27:29,37 (and only in those two verses).

³⁸ Although again there are elements of group representation in the denouement of the Jacob-Esau story as territorial separation of the brothers, with Jacob standing for Israel and Esau for Edom, it is not possible to read political relations into the reversal of expectations concerning the paternal blessing.

³⁹ Whether or not this reference to the 'patriarchal promises' belongs to a late editorial layer, as genetic study speculates, does not alter the fact that it takes its place in the totality of the story as we now have it.

⁴⁰ Jacob's nocturnal wrestling-match with the 'man' who preserves his anonymity follows in 32:22-32, but as it is not germane to our purpose I omit it here.

⁴¹ Cf. 33:4 with 29:13f.

⁴² He uses the noun *berakâ* (33:10) which, along with its cognate verb, runs throughout Chapter 27. The verb is used a number of times elsewhere of a blessing spoken as a form of greeting, as well as of farewell (appropriate to the circumstances of Isaac's blessing in Chapter 27), and the noun *berakâ* also has the sense of a gift of greeting which invokes a blessing on the recipient: cf. 1 Sam 25:27.

⁴³ This sympathetic portrayal of Esau, eponymous ancestor of Edom, who comes across as probably the one genuine character in the story, is the more remarkable, given Israel's long rivalry with Edom. This fact alone prevents the story from being read as a reflection of tribal or national history.

⁴⁴ Besides Jacob his parents are to some extent the butt of humour: Isaac is gently sent up in the stolen blessing scene, and Rebekah's schemings are shown to fail of their intended object, but to lead to the comic twists of the plot.

⁴⁵ For the distinction see Alter, 1981 pp. 24ff.

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4—

Abusive Criticism and the Criticism of Abuse

John Wilkins

I begin with a scurrilous statement:

John Major became Prime Minister because he had been buggered by Nicholas Ridley on many occasions.

This statement, insulting to both politicians and homosexuals, would be unusual in British culture. In ancient Athens, on the other hand, it was a familiar assertion. Alkibiades was the 'wide-arsed chattering son of Kleinias' (Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 716); 'they say that the young men who are most often screwed make the most formidable speakers in the assembly' (Aristophanes, *Assembly-Women* 112-3). The charge was not limited to politicians: Agathon the tragic poet, for example is hailed, 'you bugger, you are a wide-arse not just in words but in deed too' (Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousai* 200-1); an ancient commentator on Kratinos, an older comic poet, notes on the play *All-Seers* 'Aristodemos was foul and excessively given to buggery. For this reason he was called Anus. . . Aristodemos did unseemly things in the tomb of Kimon' (fr. 160KA) - Aristodemos was not necessarily a politician. In the *Life of Aristophanes* 3-4 we read:

Aristophanes first brought comedy from its early wanderings to something more useful (*chresimoteron*) and more solemn (*semnoteron*): Kratinos and Eupolis had used slander and profanity more bitter and more shameful than was necessary.

If we believe this ancient biographer, then the plays of Kratinos and Eupolis had invective more 'bitter' than this characteristic Aristophanic comment on the politician Kleon, 'he has the stink of a seal, the unwashed balls of Lamia, the anus of a camel' (*Wasps* 1035 = *Peace* 758).

I began with a political statement. There is of course no reason why a chapter on humour and history should take history to be political history

rather than the history of nutrition, the history of society, the history of ideas, women's history, or any other kind of history. I am considering political history in comedy in order to challenge an interpretation which has much support among Classical scholars.

The period under consideration is 486 BC to 404 BC, 486 being the date at which the Athenian state first officially recognised the comic chorus and provided funding from a form of taxation, and 404 being the year of Athens' defeat after a long war against Sparta and approximately the time when choruses in comedy became more attenuated, possibly through problems of funding. With the reduction in the significance of the chorus, who represented a section of the Athenian citizen body, comedy focused less on the city and its politicians and voters, and changed its character. It is the earlier form of comedy with its rich political resonance which concerns us here. Most of the comedies of this period have been lost. The sole extant survivors are eleven plays by Aristophanes, which can be supplemented with thousands of fragments from lost plays. Poets of lost plays who will be mentioned are Kratinos, Hermippos, Eupolis and Plato the comic poet. Aristophanes' earliest surviving play is *Acharnians*, his third play, produced in 425.

In this period the democracy evolved under such leaders as Perikles, Kleon and Hyperbolos. Towards the end of the period, after the death of Perikles in 429, the extent of change is disputed. It is necessary to comment briefly on this since political changes and debate were reflected in drama, in tragedy as well as comedy: for example in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458) or Euripides' *Suppliant Women* (420s) changes in the political system were overtly debated. Comedy was as likely to comment on individuals as on changes in the system. In the comedies of the 480s and the 470s, there were no references as far as we know to the influential politicians Themistokles and Kimon, though there was material available: '[Kimon] had the bad reputation of being disorderly and a drinker and like his grandfather in nature, who, because of his simple-mindedness was called Koalemos the simpleton. . . . When young he was accused of incest with his sister. They also say Elpinike was disorderly . . . ' (Plutarch *Kimon* 8). Concerning the politicians of the 460s and 450s contemporary comedy is equally silent. It is only for the later career of Perikles in the 440s that much scurrilous abuse is attested, with similar abuse in the period after Perikles, against the politicians Kleon, Hyperbolos, Peisander, Alkibiades, Kleophon and others.

We do not know whether political invective was an element in early comedy in the 480s and earlier, or not, but there is a possibility that there was a political flavour to some of the invective that came into comedy from its ancestors, religious ritualised abuse and personal invective, and a stronger possibility that this political flavour increased with the official integration of comedy into a state festival. The alternative is that political invective was suddenly invented in the 450s or 440s. Whatever its origins, political abuse in comedy appears to have developed between 450 and 404.

In politics there appears to have been a shift from rule by members of aristocratic families to rule by people from other families, and in constitutional terms, a shift from the power of the office of general to the power of non-executive speakers in the assembly. I shall return to this shortly. In comedy there seems to be an increase in attacks on non-aristocratic politicians. Political abuse in comedy tends to be very personal, but so in a sense was Athenian politics, based as it was around individuals and their supporters. Beyond the broad loyalties of democrats supporting the people and old families supporting oligarchs, the ancient equivalent of parties was 'x and his supporters', 'y and his supporters'. Now these political and comic developments may be, and probably are, related. The question I want to address is the extent to which comic poets were politically engaged in favour of a particular policy or political group. G.E.M. de Ste Croix, and Alan Sommerstein ¹ have argued that for Aristophanes at least a strong political affiliation can be detected. My purpose is to challenge Ste Croix, though, given the nature of the material, I will not be able to refute him. His case is not universally accepted, but it has proved influential.² Ste Croix' case rests on 'politics' as understood in the modern world, that is, on national leaders and the processes of government. It must be stressed, though, that 'politics' was a more extensive term in Greek culture than in ours, and so Greek drama considered as *political* drama, that is as drama which is closely related to the religious, social and political organisation of the ancient *polis*, comprised a wider range of human experience than we might suppose.³

I return to the matter of the increasing number of politicians who did not come from noble families as the century continued. In the 470s there was the aristocratic Kimon, reverently recalled after death (on which see below) in a comic fragment:

And I, Metrobios the registrar, had expectations of spending all my

days feasting in my bright old age with that god-like and most hospitable, that very best of all the Greeks, Kimon. But he has died already, and is gone (Kratinos, *Arkhilokhoi* fr. 1KA).

In the 420s, by contrast, there was Hyperbolos, of whom Thucydides says in his only reference to this man (8.73.3): 'one of the Athenians, a bad man, ostracised [in 417] not for fear of his power or influence but because of his wickedness and the shame brought on the city'. The extremes of Kimon the aristocrat and Hyperbolos the non-aristocrat should be modified somewhat to take account of politicians from less noble families in the early period (for example Themistokles) and of politicians from noble families later, such as Alkibiades. The general increase of non-aristocrats with time is nevertheless correct. We must at all times bear in mind however that an aristocratic family background is not necessarily to be associated with oligarchic affiliations. Perikles is the great illustration of this: aristocrat, yet pro-democracy. ⁴

Beside political changes we may place the development of political comedy, focusing especially on Perikles, and after Perikles on Kleon, Hyperbolos, Peisander and Alkibiades. A fragment of Eupolis appears to endorse the picture of political decline:

there is much I could say but I am unable to do so, so pained am I when I look at our city. We old men didn't run things like this in the old days: first of all, our generals were from the great houses, leaders in wealth and family whom we revered as gods almost, which in fact they were. And all our affairs went smoothly. Now wherever it may be we go on campaign with scapegoats elected as generals (Eupolis, fr. 384).

The fragment illustrates our choice: do we take this statement, so similar to many of Aristophanes', straight, or do we take it as characteristic comic praise of the past in order to revile the present?

From the 420s, if not before, whole plays were devoted to a single politician, Aristophanes, *Knights* (424) to Kleon, Eupolis, *Marikas* to Hyperbolos; then there are Plato, *Hyperbolos* (before 417?), *Peisander* and *Kleophon* (405), each of which is a play devoted to the politician named in its title. Comedy developed for these politicians characteristics which were comic trademarks: the lustful Olympian Perikles, the venal, non-Athenian Kleon, the non-Athenian Hyperbolos and Kleophon, the fat Peisander, the lustful bisexual Alkibiades. Some of these characteristics are known to be invented (the foreign birth of Kleon, Hyperbolos and Kleophon); others

may or may not be true (lustful Perikles and Alkibiades); others may well be true (Peisander's obesity). Particular issues were associated with particular figures, lawcourts and imperial revenues with Kleon, fighting with Perikles. Poets may, for personal or other reasons, have specialised, Aristophanes in Kleon, Eupolis in Alkibiades, all in Perikles and Hyperbolos.

In Athens, there was the closest connection between humour and political events, as we shall see below in the case of Aristophanes, *Knights*. To this are added more general themes: attacks on the rich in Aristophanes, *Wealth* and Eupolis, *Flatterers*; arguments for peace in Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, *peace* and *Lysistrata*; attacks on the powerful in Kratinos, *Dionysalexandros*, *Cheirones*, Aristophanes, *Knights*, Eupolis, *Bathers*, Plato, *Peisander*, and *Hyperbolos*; rejection of politicians as allegedly foreign in Aristophanes, *Frogs*, *Knights*, Eupolis, *Marikas*; revelling in the wonderful past in Aristophanes, *Frogs*, Eupolis, *Demes*, Kratinos, *Ploutoi*. All this is presented in a spirit of apparent literary, philosophical, and political conservatism. The comic goal is nearly always festive (or nuptial), utopian, and retrospective, praising in the distant past the golden age, in the short term, dead poets and politicians.

It is difficult to confirm or deny political intentions as the plays *seem to be* hostile to Perikles or hostile to Kleon; but of course they also favour the dead (only exceptionally are the dead satirised, Kimon in Eupolis, fr. 221KA, or Perikles in *Demes* fr. 110KA: 'PERIKLES. Is my bastard still alive? PYRONIDES. Yes. And he would have become a man a long time ago if he hadn't been terrified of the gibe of 'tart' son'). An ancient scholar tell us: 'Eupolis brought back from the dead Miltiades, Aristeides, Solon and Perikles (Eupolis, *Demes* iKA)'. We need be in no doubt that these great and good among the dead were brought back to the upper world in this play to chastise the corruption of the living politicians.

What then do we conclude when, in Greek comedy, a character says something derogatory about a living person? Especially when the chorus makes the statement in the first or third person as the opinion of the poet himself, having dropped the illusion that they are characters on a stage? (This is a regular feature. In *Wasps*, the chorus describes their poet Aristophanes as the hero Herakles taking on the filthy monster Kleon; in *Frogs* the chorus call for a better breed of politician (see below)). In *All-Seers*, Kratinos described Aristodemus as an anus (compare page 41); in

Clouds, Aristophanes portrayed Socrates as a disreputable philosopher for hire; in *Cheirons*, Kratinos portrayed Perikles and his wife as tyrannical and obsessed with sex; in *Babylonians*, *Knights*, and *Wasps*, Aristophanes portrayed Kleon embezzling imperial revenues, and manipulating the court system.

These developments are parallel with, and probably mimic, court invective, political invective, and iambic poetry. The language of the lampoon and the political attack was personal and insulting. How are these attacks to be interpreted? Henderson ⁵ argues that comedy and comic abuse were so closely related to the city and the language of the citizens that a political attack in comedy was similar to a political attack in a lawcourt or the assembly, and was not confined to the theatre in its effects. Ste Croix goes further, and draws up the following profile for Aristophanes: he was not an oligarch but a paternalist like Kimon; he resented the power of the popular *demos*: 'it was intolerable when ignorant and ill-educated men demanded a share in the delicate art of government'. Aristophanes attacked only non-nobles, and employed the language of the upper classes with approval; he disliked the little man and the poor man, and the juries of Perikles and Kleon which gave power to such people; and he sided with the rich in sympathy with Sparta and in opposition to the war with Sparta.

I do not necessarily disagree with this interpretation of Aristophanes' politics, since they cannot be known. In the wider context of comedy and the other comic poets, however, the relationship between *comedy* and *history* looks rather different, and the plays of Aristophanes too may be interpreted differently. The target for comic satire is a powerful individual, in the words of pseudo-Xenophon ['the Old Oligarch'] 2.18 'the person ridiculed is not of the *demos* or masses for the most part, but is a rich, noble or powerful person'. Nobles are attacked (Perikles, Alkibiades), as are the rich (Kallias, Alkibiades, Kleon), the powerful (Perikles, Alkibiades, Kleon, Hyperbolos, etc), and the intellectuals (Euripides, Sokrates). Ste Croix does not differentiate between rich and noble: for him the upper classes are the target. I would say that the prominent are the target, whatever their birth. The humiliation of powerful people and the fulfilment for a day of the fantasies of those without power, such as farmers, ordinary citizens or women, is a fundamental feature of this kind of comedy.

Consider the following attacks on Perikles:

Civil Strife and Time of ancient birth came together in love and bore

the greatest tyrant, whom the gods call 'the headgatherer'⁶ (Kratinos, *Cheirones* fr. 258KA).

In the comedies, Aspasia was called the new Omphale, and Deianeira and also Hera. Kratinos explicitly calls her a concubine in these lines:

And Buggery bore to him a daughter Hera-Aspasia, a concubine with the eyes of a bitch (Kratinos *Cheirones* fr. 259KA).

Aspasia was charged with impiety by Hermippos the comic poet who also alleged that she received free women at home for sex with Perikles:

And Diopeithes brought a decree that it was a state offence not to believe in the gods and to teach about the heavens (Plutarch *Perikles* 32).⁷

King of the satyrs, why don't you want to take up the spear but rather offer up terrible words of war and all the bravery of Telles? When the dagger is sharpened on the hard whetstone, you gnash your teeth, bitten by glinting Kleon (Hermippos, *Fates* fr. 47KA).

Ancient scholars tell us that Eupolis' *Bathers* was an attack on Alkibiades: 'Alkibiades, a victim of the comedy of Eupolis, threw him into the sea when they were on the expedition in Sicily, saying 'you dipped me at the Dionysiac altar. I will now kill you with a dip in the really bitter waters of the sea' (fr. iiiKA).⁸ We are also told that Eupolis, *Flatterers* was an attack on the rich profligate Kallias: 'Kallias the son of Hipponikos appears to have spent his ancestral wealth on depravity. Eupolis gave him the comic treatment in *Flatterers*' (fr. iiiKA). The targets of comedy then were the rich, noble and powerful, the Kallias, Perikles and Kleons of Athens, not, as Ste Croix would have it, only the Kleons. In order further to humiliate the powerful figure, unflattering comparisons were made with the dead as we have seen in the case of Eupolis, *Demes*.

As for Ste Croix' other points, attacks on the Athenian people, the poor and the little man are trivial compared with Aristophanes' words on the powerful individuals, and many plays are sympathetic to the trials of the little man (*Acharnians*, *Wasps*, *Wealth*). The poor may be manipulated by bad men, but such bad men are the powerful, as described by pseudo-Xenophon. I can find no serious support in Aristophanes for Sparta; rather, a general desire for peace, because of comedy's close association with agricultural festivals that are disrupted by war. The use of terms favouring the upper classes is ambiguous. A good example is *Frogs* 727-33:

The citizens we know to be sensible and men of noble birth, just and

aristocratic men, trained in the gymnasia and choruses and the musical arts - these men we trample on, and we make use all the time of tawdry men, foreigners, red-headed rascals descended from rascals, the latest dregs to arrive, the kind the city would even have had trouble using as scapegoats in the old days.

This could be a plea to return to aristocratic government, or it could be the familiar denigration of the present through praise of the past: in other plays the aristocratic education is associated with the old days. The current politicians here censured are Athenians of Athenian stock: their foreign origin (indicated by red hair) is not to be taken literally. It is debatable whether we take literally the praise of the nobles. It is entirely predictable that Aristophanes urges the foolish Athenians to choose better leaders: that is what comedy always urges. To go further and interpret these words as support for the oligarchic coup of 411⁹ or as reflecting Aristophanes' own beliefs (so Ste Croix) is in my view to go too far.¹⁰ Ste Croix has something of a case if Aristophanes is considered in strict isolation from genre and fellow poets. If put into context, the case is severely weakened, though an argument for a particular aristocratic bias in Aristophanes remains a theoretical (though I think unlikely) possibility. An unfortunate aspect of Ste Croix' case is that Aristophanes appears to endorse Thucydides' perception that politicians became worse (that is of lower birth) after the death of Perikles. That is a coincidence of date (Perikles died in 429; Aristophanes first performed in 427) which the wider context would not endorse: comedy lampooned the aristocratic Perikles in the 440s and 430s, and then lampooned the non-noble Kleon in the 420s.

I shall now consider 'history' under the following headings - contemporary political events, political events viewed over a period of time, and a historian's account of those events - and attempt to relate these three interpretations to comedy in the period under discussion.

Contemporary political events. We return to the matter of the way in which the real world is represented in comedy. Henderson and Ober and Strauss¹¹ make a strong case for a close relationship between the language of the political world and of the comic stage. The context in which the words were spoken, however, is crucial. The courts, the assembly and the theatre may thrash out the same issue in a broadly similar, personalised, adversarial mode in front of an audience of hundreds of jurors, thousands of citizens, and some 15,000 spectators respectively. The court process and

assembly determine the fate of individuals and the state; comedy ritually humiliates those in power, and thereby honours the god of the festival, Dionysos.

Political events viewed over a period of time. Consider the cases of Sokrates and Perikles. Sokrates was ridiculed in *Clouds* I and II (423 and 417BC). In 399, according to Plato, this caricature was used against him at his trial. This is *the* famous example of the effect of humour on history. Sokrates was said not to believe in the gods. Now Plato was not personally opposed to Aristophanes: he leads us to think in his *Symposium* that Aristophanes and Sokrates were dining companions. I would say that there was in Athens a fruitful exchange between the popular view of Sokrates and Aristophanes' inventiveness which makes him into a stage character with contemporary bite. If people later believed aspects of the stage character to be true, or brought them into political debate (Sokrates after all was in a political trial), that was because politics and comedy worked in the same area with the same language. This tells us nothing of Aristophanes' own beliefs about philosophy. If we put together all we know, we could say Aristophanes, Sokrates and Plato were friends, who may have had antidemocratic interests. Aristophanes attacked Sokrates in *Clouds*. The attack was similar to those on other philosophical targets, on Anaxagoras, for example, in the political world (see Plutarch *Perikles* 32 above, and note 7), and in comedy, on Protagoras who was a character in Eupolis, *Flatterers* (fr. iiKA), and on a chorus of 'thinkers' in Ameipsias, *Konnos*. Comedy was part of the debate and could be used politically.

Perikles in Eupolis, *Demes*, which was probably produced in 412 (seventeen years after his death) was one of the great dead. But there was still a reference to themes related to his sex-life, the 'bastardy' of his son and the 'prostitution' of his wife, that had featured in comedy in his lifetime (fr. 110KA, quoted above).

In a more general way, we may note that over a ten - or twenty - year period, Kleisthenes in comedy was always effeminate, Pauson poor, Perikles lustful, Kleon corrupt and leathery. There is a clear formulaic element.

An historian's account. Plutarch in his *Life of Perikles* remains close to Thucydides in his high estimate of Perikles, and in his dismissing of Kleon. His use of comedy as a source is impressive, and well illustrates comedy's exploitation of graphic political detail. Many of the comic fragments from

lost plays we owe to Plutarch: passages on the shape of his head are quoted from the poets Kratinos, Telekleides and Eupolis; there are fragments on the 'immoral' Aspasia, and on Perikles and Aspasia portrayed as Olympian gods; and there are fragments on Perikles' building programme and military policy. Plutarch is sometimes wary, sometimes straightforward in his quotation of comedy. He is an author who disliked the scurrility of this type of Athenian comedy (*Moralia* 853-54), but who recognised its political resonance. What he preserves for us is a range of glimpses at the way Perikles was put into comedy in the 430s, and above all an impression of his powerful position and the ways in which that power could be insulted.

The historical record inherited by us and by Plutarch is based on comedy and Thucydides where they agree. Ste Croix finds that persuasive. I would argue that comedy always has its Dionysiac slant, and is not to be taken at face value on either Perikles or Kleon: the fact that they are attacked indicates first and foremost that they were prominent at the time.

What is the *effect* of comedy on history? It was widely believed that Perikles was lustful, partly because of the way he was depicted in comedy; but it was also believed that Kimon was lustful, without this message being conveyed in comedy. The wickedness of Kleon and Hyperbolos was believed through both comedy and Thucydides. Comedy is working as an influence, a mirror, a defamer.

For the interrelation between comedy and courts and politics consider Kleon and the plays of Aristophanes. In 426, Aristophanes attacked Kleon in *Babylonians* over aspects of Athens' imperial administration. Kleon brought a prosecution against Aristophanes before the Council for slandering the city in *Babylonians* in the presence of foreigners.¹² Aristophanes gave his version in *Acharnians* in 425, and claimed to have spoken for truth and justice. Kleon became general at Pylos and won a great victory over the Spartans in 424, on the strength of which he was accorded state honours, including, we are told, the right to eat at the state hearth in the *prytaneion*. In 424, Aristophanes attacked Kleon in *Knights*, denouncing his corruption at home and abroad. A few months later, Kleon was re-elected general, an office to which he was again elected until his death on campaign in 421, the year in which Aristophanes mentioned him in *Peace* as a warrior and one who was now 'eating shit' in the underworld. In this battle between playwright and politician we may observe the following: it was possible to bring a form of prosecution against a comic

poet who had slandered the state (there are not many known cases); the audience of *Knights* voted it first prize *and* voted for Kleon - the distinction between theatre and poll booth was clearly felt.¹³ Kleon is presented as a vulgar demagogue, but he was, towards the end of his life at least, repeatedly elected to the office of general in the traditional way, like Perikles, and unlike the later 'demagogues', who, as mentioned above, were orators rather than office-holders. This detail has not been passed on to later history either by comedy or by Thucydides.

We may supplement consideration of Kleon with a passage from *Knights* in which his adversary the Black-pudding seller discusses his political training with Demosthenes (an Athenian general):

BLACK-PUDDING SELLER: I had a lot of other tricks when I was young. I used to catch out the butchers with this sort of thing: 'Hey, lads, look. The new season's here: there's a swallow.' They would look up and, as they did so, I would steal some meat.

DEMOSTHENES: You're a really smart piece of meat, and planned that cleverly. You did your stealing, like people eating their nettles, before the swallows came.

BLACK-PUDDING SELLER: And they never noticed what I was doing. But if one of them ever did see, I would stuff it up my crutch and swear in the gods' name that I was innocent. In fact one of the orators saw me doing this and said, 'there's no way this lad won't become a steward of the people'.

DEMOSTHENES: A good inference. But it's clear how he worked it out. You perjured yourself after committing a robbery and you had a man's meat¹⁴ up your arse (*Knights* 417-28).

The fictional politician is a liar, a thief of public funds and a passive homosexual. This is the general area of conduct into which real politicians will be set, as appropriate. The comic poet will be attempting to assimilate this dissolute template with something recognisable in real life, and to work the whole into the theme of his play, which in the illustration above is a parallelism between the meat trade and political life.

I will illustrate my interpretation of political comedy with a musical image. Comedy is like a violin with four different strings, the poet's own background and political preconceptions, the comic tradition, the events of the day, and the language of the polis in the streets, courts and assembly. When he draws his bow over the instrument, he may play all of these

strings, or just one, two or three of them. He may vary the notes by shortening the strings. The main aims are to play a striking tune, and preferably a memorable one. We are rarely in a position to say precisely which strings are being played. But we *can* say that the vibrating string(s) combined with the resonance of the woodwork are different from the strings resting before the instrument is played. Ste Croix has only heard one string.

The conclusions to be drawn are these. Comedy reflected what was of particular interest in the city at that moment. It imitated, reproduced and distorted, with various nuances of perfect and imperfect imitations. The personal element was clearly significant. The poets may have had a special victim, Perikles, Hyperbolos, Kleon, Alkibiades, Euripides, ¹⁵ selected for their eminence or some other reason. The genre in general was conservative since it conventionally held that the past was better: the mythical golden age, the Persian wars earlier in the century, long-dead politicians. But at the same time of course the past was also dead and of no interest. Politicians were put through the comic process in a special, Dionysiac form which may in many ways have overlapped with their real lives, but differed in an essential respect. In the assembly, politics was based on groupings, on supporters (*philoi*), on loyalties and so on. In the courts, litigants wished to win a case against an adversary. On stage, there was a contest or *agon*, using similar language to the other two, but in a different context, going over the issue in question in a special form in front of the image of the god.

Was comedy accurate or not? I conclude with two ancient views: They say that when Dionysius the tyrant of Syracuse wanted to learn about the Athenian state, Plato sent him the poetry of Aristophanes and advised him to study the plays (*Life of Aristophanes* 42-5). Not like a poet of comedy, but like one of the aristocracy, Aristophanes bore witness purely and without spite to the greatness of Perikles' rhetoric (Eupolis, *Demes* fr. 102KA).

How can one link these observations with the comic tradition in Britain? Comparisons are not easy between an ancient drama festival organised by a state and the modern theatre (which is largely independent of the state) and the very disparate modern 'media'. In Britain, comic references to the sexuality of politicians relate either to confessed sexual encounters (Harvey Proctor, David Mellor) or to speculation about male and female colleagues (Harold Wilson and Marcia Williams or John Major

and Virginia Bottomley). It is also clear that modern comic treatment of political topics - Ben Elton as a stand - up comic, Richard Ingrams in *Private Eye* - may be wide-ranging over a number of targets even where political affiliation of the comedian is known. The modern analogy may help us to accept that what Aristophanes and others say in plays may or may not reflect a political commitment in the poet, and that comic references to sex may or may not be based on actual encounters.

When considering the reaction of politicians to political attack, Mrs Thatcher's alleged admiration for *Yes Minister* on BBC Television is a useful area for consideration. Did she like the programme because its attack on the civil service and political establishment coincided with her own views? Or because it was a welcome relief from comic comment on politicians? Here was an anodyne programme produced by the state-controlled channel which could be praised for its comic outspokenness at a time of unprecedented political control of the BBC. Perhaps, from the point of view of political psychology, it was to her advantage to make clear that she had a sense of humour.

Closer to ancient comedy is the attack on Mrs Thatcher's spouse in John Wells' *Anyone for Dennis?* at the Whitehall Theatre. Although the theatre was privately owned, and the audience participated as people who had chosen to pay rather than as citizens celebrating a festival, the ancient practice of humiliating the consort of the chief minister is clearly at work. This brings us to the main point of our argument. Comedy was in antiquity, and in some respects still is, a ritualised attack on the powerful. The comedy may or may not attack the political programme of its victim and is likely to bring into play personal elements. The politician may or may not accept the whole onslaught as contained by ritual and therefore, when compared with some other forms of attack, relatively harmless. The politician will always attempt, as it were, to write a history favourable to him - or - herself. Comic abuse may tarnish that history. Our general conclusion is that the function of comedy is more often to be abusive in this way rather than corrective of social ills.

Notes

¹ G.E.M. de Ste Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (Oxford 1972), Appendix

29; Alan Sommerstein in his editions of Aristophanes' plays (Warminster 1980).

² An aspect of comedy which Ste Croix fails to address is comedy as drama which is ritualistic, festive, carnivalesque. Comedy in many ways is apart from political life: it is a form of ritualised abuse, related to other rituals in Greek cults, in particular cults of Dionysus and Demeter. Ideas of utopia, the land of cockaigne and the associations of the Dionysiac festival are central to ancient comedy, and have been studied by Jean Claude Carrière, *Le Carnaval et la Politique* (Paris 1979).

³ This has been well brought out in a collection of American scholarship from the 1980s, *Nothing to do with Dionysus?*, eds. J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin (Princeton 1990). The essays by Jeffrey Henderson, Josiah Ober and Barry Strauss, James Redfield and John Winkler are of great importance for the history of drama, and certainly for understanding the context of Greek comedy.

⁴ The best account of political changes in Athens is to be found in W. R. Connor, *The New Politicians of Fifth-Century Athens* (Princeton 1971).

⁵ J. Henderson, 'The Demos and the Comic Competition' (in Winkler/Zeitlin in n. 3) 271-313.

⁶ 'Headgatherer': the Homeric epithet for Zeus the weather-god, 'cloudgatherer', is adapted for Perikles, the new Zeus, whose head was of an unusual shape.

⁷ Aspasia, the wife of Perikles, and the philosopher Anaxagoras were intellectuals from the city of Miletos who were in the entourage of Perikles and were attacked by the enemies of Perikles, apparently in the courts, the assembly and in comedy (where the allegation about Aspasia the procurer was presumably made). This passage supports Henderson's case for courts, assembly and comedy working closely together.

⁸ The stage is meant by the phrase 'Dionysiac altar'. We should not believe literally that Alkibiades drowned Eupolis: his angry response is parallel to Kleon's response to Aristophanes, *Babylonians* (on which see below).

⁹ See W.G. Arnott, 'A lesson from the Frogs', *Greece and Rome*, **38** (1991) 18-22.

¹⁰ The influential ancient scholar Dikaiarchos tells us that this passage of the *Frogs* so amazed the audience that it was put on a second time, which was virtually unprecedented. This popularity may derive from the moderation or the oligarchic flavour of the passage (depending upon how we interpret it); at all events it is evidence for the impact of comedy beyond the actual day of production.

¹¹ Henderson (n. 4) and J. Ober and B. Strauss, 'Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy' (in Winkler/Zeitlin in n. 3), 237-70.

¹² There is an interesting implication that if the play had been produced not at the Dionysia festival, but at the Lenaia festival, which only Athenians attended, then the play would have been part of the debate about policy, behind closed doors as it were. This may support Henderson's argument that debate in comedy and debate in the assembly were closely related. I suspect that for Kleon the supposed defamation of the state was subsidiary to the personal humiliation. Furthermore if *Babylonians* did defame Athens more than individual politicians the play would be quite unlike any surviving play. Note that the insulting of individuals by name in comedy was perfectly legal, except possibly for two short periods around 438 and 415: see further S. Halliwell, 'Comic satire and Freedom of Speech in Classical Athens', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* CXI (1991) 48-70.

¹³ Henderson (n. 4) 299 wonders whether the citizens were displaying 'characteristic' Athenian fickleness in the matter. I do not find this a convincing explanation.

¹⁴ For 'meat' in the sense of 'penis' see N. Fiddes, *Meat: a natural product* (London 1991), Chapter 10, 'The Joy of Sex'.

¹⁵ It is sometimes said that Aristophanes disliked the plays of Euripides, but Kratinos (fr. 342KA) identifies the two poets as closely related in their work. This confirms the suspicion that Euripides' prominence in Aristophanes is a testimony to his importance, and may also indicate Aristophanes' admiration for his work.

5—

Paradigms of Power: Roman Emperors in Roman Satire

Susanna Braund

How could Seneca present such a degrading picture of the emperor Claudius in his satirical skit known as the *Apocolocyntosis*? How could Juvenal damn emperors such as Nero and Domitian so overtly in his *Satires*? Should such literary products be viewed as revolutionary? I intend to answer these questions by examining the political engagement of Roman satire with particular reference to the presentation of Roman emperors. The two authors mentioned above, Seneca and Juvenal, are chosen for this purpose because their works contain the most outspoken attacks on emperors in all extant Roman satire.

In the Republican period there flourished in Roman society what is sometimes described as a 'robust' tradition of personal abuse of political figures. This tradition was articulated in various literary and sub-literary forms of expression, including pamphleteering (see Finley, 1977, p. 923) and political speeches (most obviously, in the speeches of Cicero: see Richlin, 1983, pp. 96-104), satire and iambic verse (exponents here include Lucilius in the second century BC and Catullus in the first century BC), Fescennine verses (ribald wedding-songs, of which a literary version is presented in Catullus 61.126-55) and the obscene chants uttered by the soldiers at their victorious general during his triumphal procession through Rome (see Versnel, 1970, p. 95). As has been recognised, such abuse aims to diminish the power of the 'victim' and correspondingly assert power over him or her (see Richlin, 1983, *passim*).

The change from the Roman Republican system, in which several prominent men were jockeying for the highest positions, to the monarchic system which we call the Roman Empire, in which one man gained supremacy, brought with it the discouragement of personal abuse of that

one man.¹ This may be regarded as typical of an autocratic regime. Yet Roman satire does not disappear at the end of the Republic but survives into the Empire. This raises the question of how Roman satire functions in the imperial period: to what extent is personal abuse of the powerful possible under an autocratic regime? To answer this question, two major texts of Roman satire which contain attacks upon emperors will be scrutinised.

The first is Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*.² This short prose satire, with snippets of verse quotations or parody, narrates the death and attempted deification of the emperor Claudius in a far from complimentary light. The title itself is a pun on the Greek word *apotheosis* ('deification'): *Apocolocyntosis* is formed by analogy, with its central word (Greek *colocynte*) meaning 'pumpkin' instead of 'god'. Hence we may translate it as 'Pumpkinification'. Incidentally, Claudius is not actually 'pumpkinified' in the work; but it has been suggested most plausibly that the title suggests his emptyheadedness, given that this characteristic was a prime signification of pumpkins for the ancients (see Eden, 1984, pp. 3-4). The events described in the work are, briefly, as follows, with a few quotations which illustrate the unglamorous portrayal of Claudius. The narrator reports the long-drawn-out death of Claudius (2.4-3.1):

Claudius began to gasp his last breath, but he could not find the proper exit. At that point Mercury, as he had always enjoyed his wit, took one of the three Fates aside and said: 'Why are you allowing that poor man to be tortured, you cruel woman? It's sixty-four years since he began fighting against his breath. Why the malice against him and the state? Let the astrologers be right for once: ever since he became emperor they've been burying him off every month of every year. Of course, it's not surprising they make mistakes and that none of them can predict his last hour - they all thought he'd never been born.

And eventually (4.2-3):

And he did indeed gurgle out his last breath and from that moment stopped even appearing to be alive. However, when he expired he was listening to some comic actors, so you can understand that my fear of them is not unfounded. His last words heard on earth came after he'd let off a louder noise from his easiest channel of communication: 'Oh my! I think I've shit myself.' For all I know,

he did. He certainly shat on everything else.

Claudius then travels to heaven in the hope of being made a god, presumably inspired by the deification of his predecessors Julius Caesar and Augustus (5.2-3):

An announcement was made to Jupiter that there was a visitor of a respectable size and with very white hair. He was making some sort of threat, as he kept shaking his head; he was also dragging his right foot. When asked his nationality, he had made some answer with a confused noise and in indistinct tones. It was impossible to understand his language: he was neither Greek nor Roman, nor of any known race. . . Seeing the strange sort of appearance and the weird walk and hearing the hoarse and incomprehensible voice that belonged to no land creature but seemed more appropriate to a sea-monster, Hercules thought his thirteenth labour had arrived.

The matter is discussed in heaven in a parody of debate in the Roman Senate, with the same formulae and protocols. The decisive speech in the debate is the maiden speech of the deified emperor Augustus. This ensures that Claudius' application is rejected (11.3):

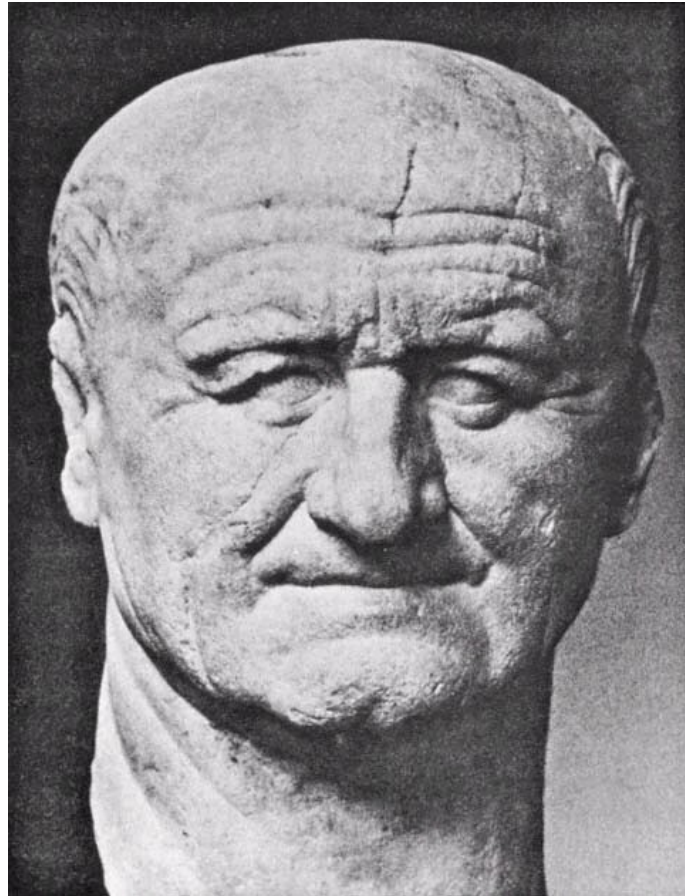
Do you now want to make this man a god? Look at his body - the gods were angry when it came into the world. In short, let him say three words one after the other and he can drag me off as his slave. Who's going to worship him as a god? Who'll believe in him?

Claudius is then whisked down to the Underworld, travelling vertically via Rome, where the Roman people are depicted rejoicing, instead of mourning his demise. In the Underworld he is greeted by a great crowd consisting of the people he has had executed. He is hauled into court by the angry mob of his victims and a new and highly appropriate punishment is devised for him. On that satisfactory point, the work ends. As is evident from the quotations cited above, among the things satirised are Claudius' physical features and disabilities, a technique recognisable from present-day satire, such as the use of caricature in *Spitting Image*.

The second work to be discussed is Juvenal's fourth *Satire*, a poem which attacks the emperor Domitian. After an introductory section in which one of Domitian's upstart courtiers is attacked, a mock-epic tone is adopted for the rest of the poem which is devoted to the narration of an incident in Domitian's court. The narrative describes the catch of an enormous fish - a turbot. The fisherman decides to present the fish to the

emperor in person, a decision inspired in part by the ubiquitous presence of informers who will doubtless confiscate the fish on the emperor's behalf otherwise. The fish is conveyed and admitted to Domitian's court. But then it is discovered that there is no dish large enough to accommodate this outsize specimen. So Domitian summons his personal council of advisers (his *consilium*) to offer suggestions on how to proceed (on the emperor's council see Crook, 1955). There follows a list of the eleven members of his *consilium*, an assortment of servile, terrified, corrupt, self-indulgent and cruel men, including two arch-informers. They offer their advice, of which the 'winning' suggestion is that the emperor should have potters make a dish large enough for the fish. The advisers are dismissed and the poem closes with the narrator's expression of disapproval of the abuse of the institution of the *consilium*, followed by his wish that Domitian had devoted all his time to such 'trifles'.

Both these works clearly offer plenty of entertainment, entertainment in the intellectual, witty mode rather than side-splitting comedy. They also have a significant political dimension which is best appreciated by a consideration of the wider context of imperial 'propaganda'. (I put the term in inverted commas because it is a modern term with connotations which can be unhelpful; the Romans had no word or, indeed, concept corresponding to our term 'propaganda'.) Roman emperors, directly or indirectly, promoted images of themselves cast in terms of particular virtues. (And often these attracted satirical comment, cf. the bust of Vespasian and Suetonius's perception of the emperor, p. 60) All forms of imperial iconography participated in this phenomenon, including panegyric speeches, history and biography, lyric and epigrammatical poetry, coins, monuments and buildings, the celebration of religious cult and so on. There was a pool (I use this word advisedly, as opposed to canon) of virtues from which different emperors drew different sets of virtues with which they wished to be associated (see Fears, 1981). The pool, which is large, includes the following virtues: *uirtus* (military prowess), *moderatio* (moderation), *libertas* (freedom), *concordia* (concord), *pax* (peace), *humanitas* (humanity), *clementia* (mercy), *liberalitas* (generosity), *securitas* (freedom from fear), *fides* (trust), *sapientia* (wisdom), *iustitia* (justice), *facilitas* (approachability) and even *pulchritudo* (beauty). Frequently in literary works the possession of (some of) these virtues is associated with the emperor's restoration or renewal of the



Tiberius Flavius Vespasianus (Photograph: Ny Carlsberg, Glyptotek, Copenhagen) "Of a middle stature he was, well-set, his limbs compact and strongly made, with a countenance as if he strained hard for a stool." Suetonius: *Life of Vespasian*, 20 (Transl Ph Holland, 1606)

Golden Age, the prehistoric time when Saturn ruled and sin was not yet known upon the earth.

Assertions that the emperor possesses some of these virtues is one side of the coin of favourable 'propaganda'. The other side of the same coin involves the denigration of the emperor's predecessor(s) for the lack of those very virtues or, indeed, for the presence of their opposites. A list of those opposites might include *dominatio* (tyranny), *licentia* (excessive freedom), *adulatio* (flattery) and *saeuitia* (cruelty). Moreover, the claim that the current emperor is responsible for the restoration of the Golden Age seems designed to imply that his predecessor's regime was an unnatural deviation from what is good and right and even that the predecessor was an impostor. The existence of such material suggests that it was normal to criticise the preceding or earlier emperor(s), especially where that emperor was the last in his dynasty. In such circumstances the new emperor generally needs to distance himself from the previous dynasty and the previous regime. Suggesting the spuriousness and/or unworthiness of his predecessor helps to establish the authenticity of his own claim to supreme power. This goes a long way to explaining the generally black pictures presented in the literary sources of the emperors Nero and Domitian, each of them the last of a dynasty. In all such cases, criticism and denigration are effective elements in self-definition and self-assertion. And this is where satire can make a contribution. With its tradition of outspokenness and criticism, it provides an ideal vehicle for denigration. Therefore, bearing in mind the pool of imperial virtues, we may now consider the criticism of emperors presented in our two satirical works. We can be fairly sure that the choice of material is revealing of Roman ideology in general and in particular of contemporary concerns at the time of composition.

Returning first to Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*, the date of composition should be noted. The work was written early in Nero's reign (ruled AD 54-68), quite possibly in the first few weeks, against Nero's predecessor Claudius (ruled AD 41-54) who was, in fact, deified at around this same time on the Senate's command.³ As was noted above, in this work Claudius is attacked for his ugly physical appearance, which may be thought to offend against the kingly and imperial quality of beauty. Besides that, it is his *saeuitia* (cruelty) which emerges most strongly. Twice he is said to have 'sacked Rome', once explicitly (6.1):

And so, as a Gaul should, he captured Rome.

and once via citation of lines from Homer (5.4):

And so, using another line from Homer to indicate he was Caesar, he said:

The winds from Ilion to the Cicon's shore,
Beneath cold Ismarus, our vessels bore.

The line after that, however, would have been more correct and equally Homeric:

We sack'd the city and destroy'd the race.

This particular manifestation of cruelty may be regarded as a perversion (or even inversion) of *uirtus* (military prowess). His cruelty is particularly manifest in his readiness to have people executed. For this alone, the narrator alleges, his shaky hand became firm (6.2):

He was, in fact, giving orders for the goddess Fever to be taken away. With his shaky hand, which was steady enough only on these occasions, making the familiar gesture with which he had people's heads cut off, he had ordered her to be decapitated.

Augustus' speech in the divine equivalent of the Roman Senate provides the ammunition for the accusation of cruelty in his catalogue of those in the imperial family executed on Claudius' orders. The speech culminates in the following motion, a parody of the formal procedure of the Roman Senate (11.5):

And then he read as follows from a notebook: Whereas the Divine Claudius has murdered his father-in-law, Appius Silanus, his two sons-in-law, Magnus Pompeius and Lucius Silanus, his daughter's father-in-law, Crassus Frugi, a man as like him as two peas, his daughter's mother-in-law, Scribonia, his wife Messalina and others too numerous to go into, I move that he be severely punished, that he be denied any immunity from trial, and that he be deported as soon as possible, leaving heaven within thirty days and Olympus within three.

This is confirmed and further expanded by the list of those who meet him on his arrival in the Underworld, all of whom have been executed by Claudius (13.4-5), and by his indictment in the Underworld court of Aeacus (14.1): 'Killed: senators, thirty-five; Roman knights, three hundred and twenty-one; the others, "as many as grains of sand and specks of dust".'

Claudius' second flaw is his lack of *iustitia* (justice). This emerges

more gradually. We first learn of his obsession with hearing legal cases from his own lips but later are told that this extended to giving judgement after hearing only one side - or sometimes neither. First, Claudius addressing Hercules says (7.4-5):

If you recall, I was the one who used to preside in court in front of your temple for whole days at a time in the months of July and August. You know what misery I went through there, listening to lawyers day and night. If you'd been dropped into that, mighty tough as you think you are, you'd have preferred to clean out the Augean sewers: I threw out a lot more bullshit.

And later (12.3):

Weep, weep
For the man's good judgements.
Who could master
Lawsuits faster,
Hearing either
One or neither.
Who will warm
The bench and dock
Through the year
And round the clock?

Hence he receives a suitable punishment when he reaches the Underworld, in that the case for Claudius' defence is not given a hearing (14.2):

The defence starts wanting to reply. The superbly impartial Aeacus denies the request, and with only one side of the case heard, finds Claudius guilty and quotes in Greek:

'What thou hast wrought shouldst thou suffer,
Straight would justice be done.'

His third failing is his lack of *sapientia* (wisdom). Throughout the work he is portrayed as stupid and, as suggested above, the title seems to make the same suggestion. For example, he is said to be ignorant of what is going on in his own bedroom (8.3) and has to see his own funeral procession to realise that he is dead (12.3). The crowning example of his stupidity, combined with cruelty, is his apparent failure to understand how his 'friends' all reached the Underworld (13.6):

When he saw them, Claudius cried out: '*Tout le monde mes amis!*'⁴ How did you get here?' Peto Pompeius then spoke: 'What do you

mean, you cruel bastard? You ask *how*? Who else sent us here but *you*, you butcher of every friend you had?

Another fault is the excessive freedom (*immoderatio, licentia*) in which he indulges. This is the implication of his being called the 'Carnival Emperor' (*Saturnalicus princeps*, 8.2). His indulgence in the forbidden pastime of dicing (12.3 and 14.4-15.1) indicates this vice. So does his excessively free granting of Roman citizenship to peoples of the empire for which he is criticised by Seneca (3.3): a manifestation of *licentia* in a highly political context. Another manifestation of this fault is his elevation of freedmen to a plane of greater importance and significance than members of the senatorial élite. This extends to his allegedly being subservient to his freedmen, a jibe made at 6.2 ('You'd have thought they were all his freedmen the way no one took any notice of him') and indirectly at the very end of the work where he finishes up assigned as a slave to a freedman in the household of the previous emperor Gaius (15.2):

Suddenly Gaius Caesar turned up and starts claiming him as his slave. He produces witnesses who had seen him being beaten by Gaius with whips, rods and his fists. The judgement is in his favour. It is to Gaius Caesar that Aeacus awards him. He in turn hands him over to his freedman Menander to put him to work as legal secretary.

Finally, we should observe the picture of rejoicing in Rome at Claudius' death. It appears that his death, rather than his birth or accession, heralds the new Golden Age. And the lengthy section in the *Apocolocyntosis* which is devoted to praises of Nero, the new emperor, is couched in precisely these terms. Nero's accession is welcomed because he is beautiful and talented and will restore justice and bring prosperity (4.1).

Turning to Juvenal's fourth *Satire*, we find a more subtle version of imperial 'propaganda'.⁵ This poem was written at least twenty years after the death of the emperor Domitian (ruled AD 81-96) who is the object of attack, late in the reign of Trajan (ruled AD 98-117) or early in the reign of Hadrian (ruled AD 117-138). The attack upon Domitian, the last of the Flavian dynasty, is more indirect than Seneca's attack upon Claudius in the *Apocolocyntosis* in that much of the satirical vehemence is directed against Domitian's advisers and other tools of the tyranny. Inasmuch as the qualities of the men prominent in his regime may be thought to reflect Domitian's own qualities, the work is an attack on Domitian.⁶

Most striking, perhaps, of the faults portrayed is Domitian's *dominatio*, his tyranny and power over everyone and everything. He has agents everywhere, even 'prowling sea-weed inquisitors' who would be prepared to 'argue the toss with the defenceless fisherman, alleging no doubt that the fish was an escaped criminal fish, a refugee from the preserves of Caesar' (lines 48-51). As the narrator says, 'anything out of the ordinary and specially fine in the whole sea belongs to the Treasury, wherever it chooses to swim' (lines 54-5). This is a clear indication that Domitian is behaving like a tyrant in laying claim to anything in the world he likes; he is the 'master' (*dominus*, 52) and everyone else is his slave (*seruus*).

Domitian's *dominatio* is one manifestation of an absence of the quality of *libertas* (freedom) which features frequently in imperial propaganda. Another manifestation of the absence of *libertas* is provided by the admission of the fish to the emperor's presence while the senators are excluded (lines 63-4). This conduct is designed to insult the senators by reducing their importance and as such is a clear indication of wrong values. It is in this specific sense of diminishing the authority of the Senate that an emperor's lack of *libertas* is often censured in writings of this period (see Wirzsubski, 1950, Chapter 5). Here, the exclusion of the senators also symbolises a lack of accessibility, another imperial fault: the ideal emperor proclaimed his accessibility (*facilitas*) to all his people.⁷

Yet another mark of the absence of *libertas* is Domitian's (tacit) encouragement of *adulatio* (flattery). Whereas under an 'ideal' emperor his advisers will (allegedly) feel able to speak their minds freely, Domitian is evidently surrounded by those who utter flattery. The fisherman's speech is replete with flattery and ends (lines 67-9):

'Haste to relieve the stomach of its rich load and gorge thyself, Great Emperor, with this Great Turbot. Nature has been keeping it expressly for thy reign. The fish itself was impatient to come and honoured to be caught.'

Similarly, Domitian's advisers indulge in the grossest and most theatrical flattery (lines 124-7):

'What a mighty omen,' says he, 'presaging a great, a signal triumph. Either thou shalt take some great king captive, or Arvagus of Britain is going to plunge from his chariot-shaft to death.'

Another failing present in Domitian's court is anxiety and lack of trust, of which the opposites in the list of imperial virtues are *securitas* and *fides*.

Domitian's advisers are memorably described as pale from the danger of their 'friendship' with the emperor (lines 72-5):

A meeting of the Privy Council is therefore summoned, those hated 'friends' of the Monarch, on whose faces sat the pallor of a great and dangerous connection.

The risks of talking to a tyrant even about the weather, are described like this (lines 86-8):

A 'friend' might risk his neck even in talking to His Grace about the rains, the floods or the dull and cloudy summer.

Another fault present in Domitian's court is *saeuitia* (cruelty). This is embodied in several of his advisers, in the two informers who end the catalogue, Veiento and Catullus who is described as 'deadly' (*mortiferus*, 113) and most explicitly in Pompeius, who is described as 'even better. . . at slitting throats with a whisper in the ear' (lines 109-10).

Another of the advisers epitomises the perversion of *sapientia* (wisdom) under Domitian: in his court 'wisdom' amounts to no more than the knowledge of cuisine and ability to offer advice that will be acceptable. Montanus' knowledge of food has kept him alive since Nero's time and his advice that Domitian should hereafter keep potters in his entourage (in case further enormous turbot are found) wins the debate (lines 131-5):

'Let a deep ashet [dish] be instantly provided to contain the spreading circumference in its fragile walls. We need a mighty and swift Prometheus for such a china salver. Quickly - the clay, the potter's wheel. And from this time, great Caesar, may potters ever attend thy headquarters.'

The narrator underlines the ironic perversion of wisdom towards the end of the poem by emphasising the gulf between what a *consilium* should do and what this one was required to do (lines 144-9):

The Council is dismissed, the great men depart - whom to his Alban fortress their great chief had dragged out of bed without warning and at top speed, as if to impart some serious tidings of what the Chatti or the fierce Sygambri might be up to, as if despatches were arriving on wings from all parts of the world.

This passage also hints at Domitian's lack of *uirtus* (military prowess) in the diversion of his interests towards matters of luxury with the implicit neglect of the safety of the empire.⁸

It seems evident that throughout the poem the satirist is attacking

Domitian by attacking his advisers who, to a greater or lesser extent, are microcosms of the emperor: their characteristics either reflect Domitian's own characteristics or are caused by his characteristics.

By taking these two satirical works together, it is possible to create a picture of the ideal emperor. The qualities of the ideal emperor include the exercise of *libertas* (freedom), that is, the avoidance of *dominatio* (tyranny) over senators and the rest of his subjects and the avoidance of *licentia* (excessive freedom) granted to freedmen or anyone else. There would be an aspiration to *ciuitas* (behaving like an ordinary citizen: see Wallace-Hadrill, 1982, especially pp. 42-4) and a proper observation of the social status of individuals; the emperor would rule by *auctoritas* (authority), gaining the respect of others. Equally he would show *humanitas* (humanity) and *clementia* (mercy), both forms of *moderatio* (on which, as an imperial virtue, see Wallace-Hadrill, 1982, p. 41), not *saevitia* (cruelty), which is the mark of the tyrant in Greco-Roman political thought. He would also exhibit *iustitia* (justice), *sapientia* (wisdom) and *uirtus* (military prowess) and would exercise all these qualities for the good of the state. And, finally, the ideal emperor would re-instate the Golden Age in which all these qualities would pervade society.

To this extent the two satirical works examined here can be seen to belong to the same ideology. Insofar as the two works emphasise particular, different, faults, they reflect the concern of the current regime with particular, different, virtues. Claudius' cruelty and injustice are the imperial faults upon which the *Apocolocyntosis* focusses, reflecting a concern with fairness, mercy and justice at the start of Nero's reign, of which Seneca's work *De Clementia* (*On Mercy*, written in the first year or so of Nero's reign: on the probably date see Griffin, 1976, pp. 133-4) is proof positive. In contrast, the absence of *libertas* in all its forms, in particular in distrust, danger and flattery, is Domitian's chief failing in Juvenal's fourth *Satire*. This, equally, reflects the prevailing concerns at the time of writing, whether the poem dates from the end of Trajan's reign or the beginning of Hadrian's.

My conclusion is this. Contrary to first appearances, Roman satire on political subjects affirms rather than challenges the status quo and buttresses the present regime, which is often if not usually defined by reference to previous regimes. This accords with the Roman tendency to view the world in terms of positive and negative *exempla*, models of

behaviour which are to be imitated or avoided. The texts of Roman satire examined here present paradigms of the Bad Emperor which may be inverted to produce paradigms of the (or a) Good Emperor. In this way, satire is an indirect manifestation of the political programme of its day. It reflects the current ideology and in turn helps to shape it, thus contributing to our historical perspective. So, in conclusion, the satire which at first sight may appear to be so revolutionary and anarchic and which likes to lay claim to a certain freedom of speech can itself, in its denigration of earlier emperors, be viewed as a disguised form of flattery and affirmation of the present regime. For this very reason, it is important not to be misled by the apparent similarities between Roman satire and contemporary British satire into thinking that they are essentially alike. Of course, both utilise savage caricature of society's leaders as a central satirical technique, but the differences are crucial.

Modern satire such as *Spitting Image* is strictly contemporary and ephemeral. (To prove this, try watching a transmission of *Spitting Image* from two years ago!) It attacks the politicians of today, along with other 'victims' including prominent members of the royal family and the world of entertainment; it tackles the issues of today which lend themselves to satire. Unlike the political works of Roman satire, modern satire like *Spitting Image* is not engaged in a dialogue with the past and is not concerned to shape the audience's view of history and of the relationship between past and present. Moreover, political satire is acceptable or, more accurately, tolerated within the current British political regime of monarchy plus representational democracy, for reasons on which I could speculate as an amateur but which are beyond my professional competence, in a way which is virtually unthinkable within the society policed by the Roman autocrat of the imperial period. In contemporary Britain, the satiric impulse is used by those who run the mass media primarily to maintain or boost their popularity ratings. But in imperial Rome, the satiric impulse is harnessed to the requirements of the regime which wields power.

Notes

¹ On political censorship generally see Finley, 1977; an example is the Senate's prosecution of Cremutius Cordus for his history under Tiberius in Tacitus *Annals* 4.34-5.

² Translations from Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*, are taken from J.P. Sullivan's translation, Penguin Books, 1986.

³ See Tacitus *Annals* 12.69 and 13.2; see Griffin, 1976, pp. 129-31 on Nero's role in the deification.

⁴ The French in Sullivan's translation represents the Greek exclamation put into Claudius' mouth by Seneca.

⁵ Translations from Juvenal's *Satires* are taken from Charles Plumb's translation, Panther Books, 1968.

⁶ On this, the microcosm - macrocosm reading of *Satire* 4, see Kilpatrick, 1973, pp. 230-5.

⁷ For example Seneca *De Clementia* 1.13.4, where the young emperor Nero is urged to be 'easy of approach and access'; Pliny *Panegyricus* 2.7 and 47.3, where the emperor Trajan is praised for this quality; on the importance of this see Millar, 1977, pp. 465-77, and Wallace-Hadrill, 1982, pp. 35, 42.

⁸ See Ramage, 1989, pp. 692-704 for a helpful explication of the denigration of Domitian's military achievements in this poem.

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6—

L'Esprit Gaulois: Humour and National Mythology

David Trotter

Such studies as have been carried out on humour across national or racial boundaries tend to suggest that, whilst the cultural environment may differ, and thus the *content* of humour may change from place to place, the *processes* themselves display a striking continuity.¹

In what was to become, for perhaps half a century, the classic manual of French literary history, Gustave Lanson observed that the comic genius of the French people, *l'esprit français*, had two inferior relatives, one of which was *l'esprit gaulois*, the other *le bon sens bourgeois*. For Lanson, *l'esprit gaulois* is 'fait de basse jalousie, d'insouciance polissonnerie et d'une inintelligence absolue de tous les intérêts supérieurs de la vie'; *le bon sens bourgeois*, 'terre à terre, indifférent à tout, hors les intérêts matériels, plus jouisseur que sensuel, et plus attaché au pain qu'au plaisir'. The division between the highest form, *le type français*, and the lower orders (*bourgeois* and *gaulois*) corresponds to a simplistic sociological division between the intellectuals, such as (presumably) Racine, Diderot or, for that matter, Lanson, representatives of *l'esprit français*, then the *bourgeoisie* and the workers, those in whom an aesthetically deplorable attachment to *l'esprit gaulois* has not been eradicated by a classical education dispensed at the better class of *lycée*. Anthropologists might choose to see in the Lanson classification a last vestige of the Indo-European trifunctionalism held to be evident in societies as diverse as medieval Europe and ancient India or Greece. An appendix to Lanson's manual, written after the First World War, mitigates somewhat the apparently damning verdict on the two lower classes of French *esprit*: for, now, Lanson recognised that their contribution could not be overlooked. Henceforth, just as the *mutilés de guerre* had seats set aside for them on public transport, so the humour of the *poilus* of

Verdun was grudgingly allowed a special place in the Pantheon of national humour: 'Il y a tout de même autre chose dans l'esprit *gaulois* et dans l'esprit *bourgeois*. On l'a vu dans la dernière guerre'.² Yet Lanson never really produces much of a definition of *l'esprit gaulois*. The impression given is that it is something so well known as not to need proper description, a form of coarse humour characteristic of the lower orders of society, and thus inevitably concerned with the baser instincts.

Consultation of dictionaries is not much more enlightening. The *Trésor de la langue française* suggests that *l'esprit gaulois* (as one might surmise) is so called because of a supposed connection with the *Gaulois*, or Celts, the occupants of France before the Roman settlements in the first century B.C. and the celebrated division of Gaul into three parts by Caesarean section. *Gaulois* (adj.), in the *Trésor de la langue française*, vol. IX, sub **gaulois**, B.3(b), is used metaphorically, to refer to something 'qui se présente sous un jour libre, plaisant, grivois, licencieux', this apparently being thought to be typical of these distant ancestors of modern lower-class Frenchmen. *L'esprit gaulois* is an enthusiasm for the cruder end of the comedy spectrum, risqué music-hall acts rather than the sophisticated donnish wit reputedly much in evidence in recondite disquisitions such as this. Further exploration, in French encyclopaedias, and particularly in the sub-genre of encyclopaedias of literature, uncovers a further (and revealing) point of reference. The true spiritual home of *l'esprit gaulois*, we are told, is in the Old French *fabliaux*, short, comic verse texts. These, for Lanson's generation, were naturalistic, literal accounts of everyday life which present, *inter alia*, *l'esprit gaulois* in unexpurgated and unadulterated form. Modern commentators who wish to provide their readers with further information on *l'esprit gaulois* almost invariably point them in the direction of this literary genre. The *Petit Robert*, for example, illustrates what it understands by *l'esprit gaulois* by categorizing it as 'des *fabliaux*, de Rabelais'. The definition by reference to the *fabliaux* and indeed to Rabelais has added advantages: it saves literary historians with delicate sensibilities from having to go too closely into the exact nature of *l'esprit gaulois*, a potentially embarrassing exercise, and it enables them to hint at their own vast erudition in a suitably arcane area of French literature. The *fabliaux*, like Rabelais, belong to that body of literary texts which are much cited but little read.

L'esprit gaulois, then, is licentious humour, such as was purportedly

favoured by the Gauls, and such as is found (for example) in the Old French *fabliaux* which flourished during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. French history text-books, which began, once upon a time, with 'Nos ancêtres les Gaulois . . .', remind us that all Frenchmen, by definition, are originally Gauls. This supposed Gaulish lineage automatically ensures that *l'esprit gaulois* becomes one of the constituent parts of the 'national' sense of humour.³

So far, so good. But if this conception of *l'esprit gaulois* is to stand scrutiny, it seems to me that a number of conditions must be met. Firstly, it would help to know for certain that the ancient Gauls went in for this sort of humour, and that the metaphorical use of their name in this context has some historical foundation. If the *fabliaux* are the characteristic manifestation of *l'esprit gaulois*, said *esprit* must appear in the *fabliaux*. Finally, and above all, if we are to accept *l'esprit gaulois* as a national characteristic of the French (or perhaps just of some of the French), then it must, demonstrably, be a form of humour not found elsewhere.

None of these conditions, it seems to me, is met in the case of *l'esprit gaulois*. Despite *Astérix*, our knowledge of the Gauls is still fairly rudimentary: few classical authors mention them, and fewer still provide any information about what would now, regrettably, have to be called their 'lifestyle'. We do know that what was spoken in Gaul before the Roman invasions was a Celtic language of the Brittonic variety, but there is no reason whatever to suppose that it was the same throughout the whole of present-day France. What must surely be the definitive work on the subject, Joshua Whatmough's monumental *Dialects of Ancient Gaul*, makes it clear that this cannot have been so.⁴ Recent genetic evidence about the distribution of ethnic groups in Europe and elsewhere suggests, moreover, that there was a major division between the inhabitants of northern and southern France as well as (and perhaps at the heart of) the linguistic one between *langue d'oïl* and *langue d'oc*. Gaul, in other words, was not populated by a homogeneous, identifiable tribe called the Gauls; rather, it was occupied by a group of loosely-related, Celtic-speaking tribes. It goes without saying that there were also Celts scattered around the rest of pre-Roman Europe, so that the idea of France being in any sense ethnically distinct from adjacent countries is a nonsense.⁵ Needless to say, not a lot is known about what made the Gauls laugh. The archaeological evidence from which we derive most of our information does not, as far as I know,

shed much light on the matter. In other words, there is precious little which substantiates the idea that we may attribute the creation of what we now know as *l'esprit gaulois* to these denizens of pre-Roman France.

What about the *fabliaux*? There is little doubt that they were much appreciated in medieval France. A hundred and fifty or so, of admittedly varying quality, survive. Their subject-matter does indeed often conform admirably to modern definitions of *l'esprit gaulois*. Stock plots include the seduction by passing clerics of young wives whilst their grumpy and usually older husbands are off at work; accounts of slapstick punishments meted out to the hapless husbands; adulterous and fornicatory liaisons prosecuted in the most improbable venues. The tone, so conventional wisdom has it, is frivolous, enthusiastically licentious, and often virulently anti-feminist, crudely realistic, and uncompromisingly vulgar. Four-letter words, the naming of bodily parts, vigorous sexual activity and excretion abound. The *fabliaux* are not for those with weak stomachs, an impression only re-inforced by the curious fact that those who choose (I assume that they *do* choose) to write about them often prefer not to discuss adequately the more scabrous stories.

The interpretation of the *fabliaux* current at the time of Lanson's manual was that advanced by Joseph Bédier, whose book on the subject was published in 1893.⁶ It is a view which has survived unscathed until surprisingly recently. The main point of the literary analysis in Bédier's book was the (as it turned out) quite unsustainable theory that the *fabliaux* were a type of literature designed for consumption by the lower orders, who were judged incapable of rising to the heights of aesthetic sensitivity deemed necessary in order to appreciate the refined style of courtly lyric and romance. The superimposition of modern tastes leads critics (in both senses of the word) of the *fabliaux* to the inescapable conclusion that they can surely only have been destined for the lower social orders. Literature, in other words, was subdivided into sociological categories, rather like Lanson's hierarchy of *esprit français*, *esprit bourgeois* and *esprit gaulois*, although the last two tend to be conflated. Bédier, in the course of his examination of the *fabliaux*, devotes six pages to what he describes as '*fabliaux* which correspond to the definition of *l'esprit gaulois*',⁷ and provides a thumbnail sketch of what he understands by this form of humour, with its twin components, 'la verve facilement contente, la bonne humeur ironique'; *l'esprit gaulois* is:

sans arrière-plans, sans profondeur; il manque de métaphysique; il ne s'embarrasse guère de poésie ni de couleur; il est ni l'esprit de finesse, ni l'atticisme. Il est la malice, le bon sens joyeux, l'ironie un peu grosse, précise pourtant, et juste. Il ne cherche pas les éléments du comique dans la fantastique exagération des choses, dans le grotesque; mais dans la vision railleuse, légèrement outrée, du réel. Il ne va pas sans vulgarité; il est terre à terre et sans portée; Béranger en est l'éminent représentant. Satirique? non, mais frondeur; 'égrillard et non voluptueux, friand et non gourmand'. Il est à la limite inférieure de nos qualités nationales, à la limite supérieure de nos défauts.

Mais il manque à cette définition le trait essentiel, sans lequel on peut dire que l'esprit gaulois ne serait pas: le goût de la gaillardise, voire de la paillardise.

[without afterthoughts, with no hidden depths; bereft of metaphysical concerns, encumbered with neither poetry nor art, displaying neither finesse nor polished style. It consists of good-humoured malice, cheerful common sense, a rather clumsy irony, but well-aimed, and accurate. It does not try to find comedy in fanciful exaggeration, in the grotesque, but in a sardonic and slightly enlarged vision of reality. It is not without vulgarity, it is down-to-earth, ephemeral: Béranger [nineteenth-century satirist] is the pre-eminent example. Satirical? no, but disrespectful; 'ribald rather than sensuous, a gourmet rather than a glutton'. It lies at the bottom of the scale of national qualities, but tops the list of national defects.

But this definition lacks the essential characteristic, without which *l'esprit gaulois* would not exist: a taste for the rude, indeed for the downright lewd.]

Noteworthy in this assessment is the rather condescending emphasis on the intellectual limitations of *l'esprit gaulois* (a type of humour which is *facilement contente*; *l'ironie un peu grosse*; *le bon sens*; *terre à terre*) and Bédier's reference to national characteristics. A few pages later, Bédier apologetically disposes of the 'fabliaux obscènes' (twenty-five or so, something approaching a sixth of the total) in less than a page, declining even to mention the titles of many in the footnote to which the list (subdivided into priapic and scatological stories) is relegated.⁸ These, for him,

are 'l'about[issem]nt extrême, et peut-être nécessaire, de l'esprit gaulois'. In the conclusion to his study, Bédier repeats the notion that the *fabliau* is an 'excellent témoin des qualités inférieures de notre race'. His comment is interesting as a manifestation of the undercurrent of nationalism in Bédier's writings.⁹

Bédier's influential study is sub-titled 'Etudes de littérature populaire et d'histoire littéraire du moyen âge'; the book is divided into two main parts, the first an attack on the then orthodox theory of oriental origins of the *fabliaux*, the second a more strictly literary study. The aim, in other words, is to demonstrate the popular French origins of the *fabliaux*: they are French, and they are *populaire*, of the people. The taxonomy of medieval literature is intended to correlate as closely as possible with the contemporary social hierarchy. Alas, it is not so simple; and, in fact, Bédier himself suggests as much when he discusses the apparent paradox that the *fabliaux*, created by and for the bourgeoisie and the *menu peuple*, were in the event also enjoyed by other social classes.¹⁰

Nor do the problems end there. Firstly, disturbingly few *fabliaux* present as crude a view of the world as the commentators suggest. The obscenity which is supposedly the appropriate linguistic form in which to describe sex and violence is comparatively rare; as we have seen, only about a sixth of the extant texts are classified by Bédier as - 'obscene'.¹¹ Contrary to popular misconception, the language of most of the *fabliaux* is restrained, and the subject-matter often indistinguishable from the courtly romance. It may be presented in a humorous light, but the stories (of adultery, of failed love-affairs, of deceptions and intrigues) are not unheard-of in the romance. They may manifest *l'esprit gaulois*, but it does not usually descend into the *bas-fonds* of socially unacceptable *gauloiserie*. Nor, of course, should we take seriously the notion that the *fabliaux* are 'realistic', accurate portrayals of life amongst the lower classes: they are no more 'realistic', no more constrained by historical accuracy, than (say) the Arthurian romance or the love-song.¹² And, above, all, the idea that the *fabliaux* were exclusively by and for the lower classes has been shown to be quite mistaken. The courtly-*fabliaux* opposition is a fallacy; all the evidence points to enjoyment of the *fabliaux* across all social classes.¹³ The next problem is, of course, that, even if we accept that there is a current of so-called *esprit gaulois* in the *fabliaux*, there is absolutely no evidence that the French alone were entertained by stories of sex and violence, that

they, uniquely, enjoyed accounts of husbands being duped, that there is anything specifically French about a taste for lurid accounts of fornicating clerics and merry widows. On the contrary: the *fabliaux* lie at the heart of a pan-European tradition of bawdy comedy. It is found in Chaucer and Boccaccio, to name two obvious exponents; a substantial number of *fabliaux* have counterparts in the fourteenth-century German *Gesamtabenteuer* collection; the Spanish picaresque tradition presents more of the same. In Latin literature of the Middle Ages, the goliardic verse of the *Carmina Burana* presents a similar picture of licentious clergy as we find in the *fabliaux*. Savage treatment of cuckolded husbands is neither unique to the *fabliaux* nor a particular feature of the French tradition. Nothing, in other words, allows us to think of the *fabliaux* as a literary or (still less) cultural tradition unique to medieval France: if the *fabliaux* are the high point of the expression of *l'esprit gaulois*, then it follows that the grounds for regarding the latter as exclusively French are shaky indeed.

A further nail in the coffin of *l'esprit gaulois* is provided by the linguistic evidence concerning the term itself. I hope to be able to show that it is not so much a nail as a death-dealing stake right through the coffin of a remarkably resilient vampire. Firstly, perhaps unimportantly, there is no trace of the use of the expression during the Middle Ages. I am unable, in fact, to find any indication in any of the dictionaries which I have consulted of when *esprit gaulois*, as a set expression, is first used. The first French dictionary to give the expression seems to be Littré, who notes it in 1874; the expression is certainly in use in the middle of the nineteenth century, and perhaps earlier.¹⁴ The adjective *gaulois* itself is not found before the fifteenth century, and then only in a one-off example of a proverbial locution containing it, *à la vieille gauloise*, 'in the old style'.¹⁵ If, in addition, the next recorded attestation of *gaulois* is only found a couple of centuries later, in an obscure conflation of folk-songs called the *Comédie de chansons* first (and probably last) performed in 1640, then the quizzical observer might be forgiven for raising an eyebrow at the proposition that the *fabliaux* could be held responsible for consciously or unconsciously promoting *l'esprit gaulois*.

But the most conclusive evidence against the notion of *l'esprit gaulois* lies not in the (perhaps) chance failure of examples of the expression to survive from the Middle Ages, nor in the certain and inevitable failure of medieval French dictionaries to pick up absolutely everything which

actually has survived from the Middle Ages. The real case against *l'esprit gaulois* is the word *gaulois* itself. According to which etymological dictionary you choose to believe, it derives either from Old Low Frankish **walhisk*, or (plot B) the adjective *gaulois* is a derivative of *Gaule*, itself from Old Low Frankish **Walha*.¹⁶ In the event, it makes little difference which hypothetical route is preferred. Both **walhisk* and *gaulois* are cognate with Old High German *walh*, Middle High German *walsch*, used of foreigners in general and 'Romance-speakers' in particular. They are cognate, too, with the English word *wealth* (modern *Welsh*). There is also an earlier French reflex of **walhisk*, *galeis/galois* (now *gallois*), which antedates *gaulois* by several hundred years. Found from Chrétien de Troyes onwards, it is used throughout Old French to refer, principally, to Celtic and, particularly, Welsh language and individuals and, in the parts of France adjacent to countries where Germanic languages were spoken, to the *French* language. This latter meaning is a case of the influence of nearby Germanic cognates (Middle High German *walsch*; cf. also *wallon*), with the sense of 'Romance' already discussed. With this second meaning, *galois* occurs, notably, in documents (literary and non-literary) from Picardy, Hainaut and Lorraine, all regions where such interference from nearby Germanic languages may be easily explained. In modern times, *gaulois* (in the sense of *l'esprit gaulois*) has also generated the noun *gauloiserie* (attested in Larousse from 1872), a salacious joke or remark, and the adverb *gauloisement* (from 1875). The most famous use of *gaulois*, or rather the feminine, *gauloise*, dates from 25th April 1910, when the greatest French contribution to atmospheric pollution was so baptized.¹⁷

The crux of the problem lies, curiously enough, not with the word *gaulois* but with the earlier *galois*. For *galois* ('Welsh') has a homonym, in medieval French, in *galois* from quite another source, this time the Old Low Frankish **wala* (cf. English *well*), the noun which the etymologists have alighted on as the origin of the hypothetical Proto-Gallo-Romance etymon **walare*, whence *galer*. *Galer* persists in the modern participial adjective *galant*, and in derivatives such as *galanterie*. Old French *gale*, as in François Villon's *compains de galle*,¹⁸ gave Spanish *gala* in turn appropriated by English as *gala*. French *gale* has gone, like so much else, with the wind of post-medieval developments in the French lexis. The range of derivatives from *galer*, in Old and Middle French, is much more impressive than the paltry survivals in modern French suggest. In addition

to the verb *galer* (transitive, intransitive and reflexive), the *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* and the *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français* list between them the following forms: *gale s.f.* (already mentioned) and *galerie s.f.* 'amusement, pleasure'; *galie s.f.*, *gallière s.f.* and (perhaps) *galeresse s.f.* 'prostitute'; *galet s.m.* 'surnom d'un joyeux compagnon'; *galiier v.refl.* and *v.n.* 'to mock, make sarcastic comments'; *esgaller v.refl.* and *esgaluer v.refl.* 'to display pleasure'; *trigaler v.n.* 'mener une vie de débauche'; *trigalerie s.f.* 'debauchery'; *s.f. trigale* 'object of derision' and the hapax *trigal s.m.* (s.xiv), 'sexual activity'; *rigale s.f.* 'joyful noise, racket', connected to modern *régale* and the associated (and slightly earlier) *se régaler*. Numerous metaphorical, euphemistic and imaginative meanings for most of these words can be found in the eleven-page entry under **wala* in volume 17 of the *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*.¹⁹ Most importantly from our point of view, one of the **wala* derivatives is *galois*, from the early thirteenth century onwards, meaning 'joyful, happy', and the same word used as a noun in Middle French (in, e.g. Froissart). Villon's *Ballades en jargon* talk of *galois* as late as the mid-fifteenth century; Huguët has a longish article on it in his dictionary of sixteenth-century French.²⁰ The *FEW* confirms that *galois*, from **wala* not from **walhisk*, is used not only throughout medieval French and during the sixteenth century, but is alive and well (or was towards the end of the last century) in the French dialect of Normandy, the Franco-Provençal Forez region near Lyon, and in numerous dialects of Occitan as well.²¹ *Gal(l)oise* is the female equivalent of *galois*, with senses ranging from that of simply 'femme galante' in 1372, and the euphemistic 'jeune fille gaie et éveillée' in La Fontaine (1668) to the more venal 'prostitute' in Cotgrave's 1611 dictionary. In 1874, the writer Huysmans attempted, without much success, to re-introduce *galoise* (no doubt as a conscious archaism).²²

Significantly, perhaps, the Tobler-Lommatzsch dictionary of medieval French²³ makes no attempt to distinguish *galois* from **wala* and *galois* from **walhisk*, listing the senses of both 'Welsh' and 'joyful, happy' ('munter, lustig') under the same headword *galois*. Similarly, the historical section at the end of the *Trésor de la langue française* entry for **gaulois** includes both meanings. In some respects, this is a legitimate way of honestly representing the picture in medieval French.²⁴ It highlights the problem of homonymy which lies at the heart of *gaulois* in the expression *l'esprit gaulois*. Medieval French was much less concerned with the

problems of homonymic clash than subsequent stages of the language, and readily tolerated a plethora of homonyms which modern French has often officiously tidied up.²⁵ There can be little doubt, from examination of the words etymologically related to *galer* which I have just mentioned, that such homonymic confusion could well have arisen in the case of *galois/gaulois*. Two distinct Germanic etyma underwent a process of phonetic change to yield identical Old French forms with separate meanings. These are just the circumstances under which contamination can easily take place. The evidence suggests that *l'esprit gaulois* is simply a use of the adjective *galois*, an adjective of well-established pedigree, denoting various forms of pleasurable and pleasure-seeking activity. *Galois* (from **wala*) never seems to have developed into the form *gaulois*; phonetically, there is no reason why it should have done so.²⁶ None the less, I believe that it can be plausibly argued that *l'esprit gaulois* has far more, *semantically*, to do with the *galer* group than with **walhisk* and 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois'. There are two critical periods in the contamination process. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there is an overlap, when (on the one hand) *galois* from **wala* is still alive and kicking, and (on the other) *gaulois* (from **walhisk*) has already appeared, albeit (so far) as a hapax in this thoroughly under-investigated period of the French language. The next attestation of *gaulois*, in the *Comédie de chansons* in 1640, is used in a suspiciously similar context to that in which we regularly encounter *galois* from **wala*, in a reference to 'compagnons gaulois'. Here, surely, they are not 'Gaulish' companions (which would mean next to nothing in the passage in question) but 'boon' companions, what Villon, two hundred years before, would have called his 'compains de galle' or 'galois'.²⁷

Why then, has it become accepted wisdom (an *idée fixe*, indeed) that *l'esprit gaulois* is a peculiarly French phenomenon, as much a part of *la France profonde* (whatever and wherever that might be) as the Gallic shrug, the beret and the baguette? The necessary information for the demolition of the myth of *l'esprit gaulois* is available in no more inaccessible a source than the *Trésor de la langue française*; but the myth has survived the assault of the philologists' small print. The answer to its longevity lies, I suspect, in a nationalist ideology which depends, for its survival, on the creation and dissemination of convenient national characteristics and stereotypes. It is no accident that (as far as I have been able to ascertain) the phrase *l'esprit gaulois* first occurs towards the middle

of the nineteenth century, a period when medieval literature, decent and indecent, was drawn on as a source of national and nationalist inspiration. *L'esprit gaulois*, in the context of the squabbles between anti-clerical Republicans on the one hand and Catholics on the other, is initially some sort of vague, pre-Christian inspiration, a source of good or evil depending on the point of view of the writer. *Gaulois* itself is habitually used in opposition to *catholique* and *chrétien*. This sense, and the myth of the Gauls which underpins it, is the sense in which historians like Michelet, Henri Martin and Amédée Thierry use *gaulois*. The modern implications of *l'esprit gaulois*, implying now bawdiness and licentiousness, come later still, with literary critics and authors like Théophile Gautier and Taine apparently picking up the older sense which the adjective *gaulois* has in the seventeenth century. From 1844, *l'esprit gaulois* is used in its modern sense. ²⁸

Amongst the many national stereotypes, that of humour plays an important part. We all know that the English are eccentric and fond of nonsense, that Germans have no sense of humour (witness a recent excruciating advertisement for Audi), that the French oscillate between being intellectually witty, classically *spirituel*, on the one hand, and on the other, a predilection for a very different category of *esprit*, which tradition (though a less venerable tradition than most people think) calls *gaulois*. Such ideas about national characteristics seem to me neither helpful nor intellectually acceptable. Historical enquiry is not assisted by uncritical dependence on tired clichés. This is even more true of the investigation of modern France which is becoming an ever more important part of French Studies. There is a lesson, ironically enough, in Gustave Lanson's grudging praise of *l'esprit gaulois*:

Le bon sens narquois et goguenard implique une volonté de ne pas être dupe, de voir clair. Il s'attaque moins aux grandes choses qu'aux grands mots, aux prétentions qui s'étalent, et à l'idéalisme de façade derrière lequel manoeuvrent des intérêts et des ambitions. ²⁹

[Sardonic, mocking common sense implies a wish to keep reality in sight, not to be fooled. It is less a matter of attacking important things than important language, pretensions on display, and a superficial attachment to fine theories behind which hidden interests and ambitions manoeuvre.]

Notes

¹ Jeffrey H. Goldstein, 'Cross Cultural Research: Humour Here and There', *It's a Funny Thing. Humour. International Conference on Humour & Laughter*, Cardiff 1976, eds. Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot (Oxford, 1977), pp. 167-74. Despite having a chapter entitled 'How to laugh at their [sc. Frenchmen's] jokes', T. Zeldin's *The French* (London, 1983), in many respects a tedious compendium of generalization from the particular, at least points out (pp. 72-5) that humour is not, after all, nationally determined.

² Gustave Lanson, *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris, s.d. [prefaces dated 1909, 1912], p. 9); the qualification comes only in an appendix at the end of the book (p. 1183). The passage is quoted verbatim in Lanson's *Histoire illustrée de la littérature française* (Paris, 1923), with the qualification as follows '... Notons toutefois qu'il ne faut pas trop mépriser l'esprit gaulois ni l'esprit bour geois. On l'a vu dans la dernière guerre' (p. 9). I owe this reference to Lanson to R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago and London, 1983), p. 133 n.28, quoting the *Histoire illustrée de la littérature française* (Paris, 1923), p. 9.

³ No less a figure than the now fashionably unconventional Arthur Rimbaud mentions (I assume ironically) his 'ancêtres gaulois', from whom he claims to derive 'l'oeil bleu blanc, la cervelle étroite, et la maladresse dans la lutte' in a passage seemingly influenced by the poet's youthful exposure to Michelet (Arthur Rimbaud, 'Mauvais sang', in the collection *Saison en enfer*). Bernard Leuilliot, 'Rimbaud, lecteur de Michelet', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, LXXIV (1974), pp. 852-61, discusses Michelet's influence on this passage, amongst others.

⁴ Joshua Whatmough, *The Dialects of Ancient Gaul. Prolegomena and records of the Dialects* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970), preface. Whatmough's introduction, 'KEL TIKÁ, being prolegomena to a study of *The Dialects of Ancient Gaul*', first published in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, LV (1944), is reprinted at the beginning of Whatmough's *Dialects*. Scholars from J. Jud onwards had drawn attention to the impossibility of linguistic uniformity in pre-Roman Gaul.

⁵ For a balanced summary, see Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language. The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (London, 1987), pp. 211-49; and, for linguistic problems, J. Whatmough, op. cit..

⁶ Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux. Etudes de littérature populaire et d'histoire littéraire du moyen âge* (Paris, 6th edition, 1964).

⁷ Bédier, op. cit., pp. 313-9. Quotation from pp. 317-8.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 325-6 and n.1, p. 326. The quotation is from p. 326: the text reads 'aboutissant', presumably for 'aboutissement'. Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux. Etude d'histoire littéraire et de stylistique médiévale* (Copenhagen, 1957), deals with obscenity less squeamishly, but stops short of covering everything in detail, pp. 208-26.

⁹ Quotation from Bédier, op. cit., p. 428. A surprising anti-German outburst also mars the closing pages of the treatment of *La Chanson de Roland* in *Les Légendes épiques* (4 vols, Paris, 3rd edition, 1926-9), III, p. 453. It is worthy of note, in this context, that Bédier

wrote propaganda pamphlets about alleged German atrocities during the First World War.

¹⁰ Bédier, *Fabliaux*, pp. 371-85: 'Il semble donc qu'il y ait, au XIII^e siècle, jusqu'à un certain point, confusion et promiscuité des publics' (p. 385).

¹¹ See n.7, *supra*.

¹² See Nykrog, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 224 and, most recently, Philippe Ménard, *Les Fabliaux. Contes à rire du moyen âge* (Paris, 1984), p. 96.

¹⁴ E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, II (Paris, 1874), sub **gaulois**. See n.27, *infra*.

¹⁵ *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch (FEW)*, XVII, 490b.

¹⁶ Most recently, Möhren and Baldinger, in *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française (DEAF)*, I (1974), 98, suggest that the route is via the French form *Gaule*. See also *FEW*, XVII, 490b-491a: 'Aus **Walha* fr. *Gaule*. Das zugehörige adj. *gaulois* (aus **walhisk*) hat dann die bed[eutung] eines wertenden adj. erhalten', *ibid.*, 491a. The historical section of the *Trésor de la langue française* entry for *gaulois* (IX, 130-131, published in 1981) visibly derives from *DEAF*.

¹⁷ See Antoinette Ehrard, 'Les Gaulois hétéroclites', *Nos Ancêtres les Gaulois. Actes du Colloque International de Clermont-Ferrand*, ed. Paul Viallaneix and Jean Ehrard (Faculté des Lettres et Sciences humaines de l'Université de Clermont-Ferrand, 1982), pp. 483-86 (p. 484). *La Gauloise* apparently used to be called *l'Hongroise*, which doubtless endowed it with suitably Bohemian connotations for its devotees; but there was another *Hongroise*, so terminological nationalization was called for.

¹⁸ J. Rychner and A. Henry (ed.), François Villon, *Le Testament* (Geneva, 1974), v. 1720.

¹⁹ *FEW*, XVII, 473a-484a.

²⁰ *DEAF*, I, 84-87. A. Lanly (ed. and trans.), François Villon, *Ballades en jar gon* (Paris, 1971), III, v. 21; E. Huguet, *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle*, II (Paris, 1950), sub **galois**.

²¹ *FEW*, XVII, 473b-474a.

²² *FEW*, XVII, 483 n.8 and *DEAF*, I, 86.

²³ *TL*, IV, 74.

²⁴ Compare, however, the solutions adopted by the *DEAF* (entry sub **galer** from **wala*, separate entry sub **galois** = mod. *gaulois*).

²⁵ See W. Rothwell, 'Medieval French and Modern Semantics', *MLR*, 57 (1962), pp. 25-30.

²⁶ It must be said that there are certain phonetic problems involved in the suggested etymology of *gaulois*, and the relationship of this form with the earlier *galois*, also from **walhisk*. Presumably the doublet is explained as follows: (1) metathesis of -*lh*- in **walhisk* (or **walha*: it makes no difference) to produce -*hl*-; (2) either (a) effacement of -*h*- (normal, when followed by *l*, in (e.g.) Old High German) to produce *gal(l)ois* or (b) vocalization of what is sometimes called 'velar -*h*-' (i.e. *Ach-Laut*), after metathesis, to produce *gaulois*.

²⁷ *The Trésor de la langue française*, IX, 131, cites the *Comédie de chansons* example after two for *galois* 'gai, joyeux', as 'de nouv. 1640 *gaulois* 'id.'', which I take to mean that the editors regard *gaulois*, here, as a continuation of *galois*.

²⁸ Théophile Gautier, *Les Grottesques* (quoted in *Trésor de la langue française*, IX, 131). On the (mis)use of the Middle Ages at this time, see Janice R. Dakyns, *The Middle Ages in French Literature 1851-1900* (Oxford, 1973). Other instances of *l'esprit gaulois*: Viollette-Duc writes in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture française* (VII, p. 142) in 1844 of thirteenth-century church sculpture that 'le vieil esprit gaulois perçait à travers le christianisme'; Ernest Renan, in 1856: 'l'esprit gaulois, esprit plat, positif, sans élévation . . . destructeur de toute noblesse et de tout idéal' (*Oeuvres complètes*, II, pp. 211-212). These texts, and others, are quoted in Dakyns, op. cit., pp. 102-5. It may well be that a complete combing of the works of the historians of the first half of the nineteenth century would yield an earlier attestation. A wealth of information on this whole subject will be found in *Nos Ancêtres les Gaulois. Actes du Colloque International de Clermont-Ferrand*, ed. Paul Viallaneix and Jean Ehrard (Faculté des Lettres et Sciences humaines de l'Université de Clermont-Ferrand, 1982). My colleague Michael Pakenham tells me that there existed, briefly, an illustrated pro-Republican journal called *L'Esprit gaulois*, in 1881-82 (see Philippe Jones, *La Presse satirique illustrée en France entre 1860 et 1890* [s.l.n.d.], pp. 56-7, who describes it as 'de tendance nettement républicaine'). See n.2, *supra*, on the influence of Michelet on Rimbaud. During the seventeenth century, Bussy-Rabutin's popular satire on contemporary society, the *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules* (1665), peddled a particular view of Gaul as the mythical era of *galanterie* (see Elizabeth Woodrough, 'L'Histoire amoureuse des Gaules, satire de cour', Rabutinages, 1988).

²⁹ Lanson, op. cit., p. 1183.

7—

The Devil and Comedy

Gareth Roberts

I

Umberto Eco's medieval whodunit, *The Name of the Rose*¹, is among many other things, a meditation on humour, comedy and laughter - words which can all be either synonyms *or* antonyms for each other, depending on the context. In it, monks discuss the probity and functioning of comedy, and wonder whether Christ laughed; and the unlikely motive for its series of murders is concealment of the sole surviving copy of the lost second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, on comedy. The novel's concern with comedy shows the pervasive influence of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on laughter and carnival, especially in his book *Rabelais and his World*² (1965, Eng tr 1968). So, for example, in *The Name of the Rose*,³ when the aged and blind monk Jorge of Burgos quotes from memory a third-century Egyptian alchemical work which describes the creation of the world caused by God's laughter, Jorge and Eco are actually remembering Bakhtin's book Chapter I, footnote 19, where precisely this same quotation may be found. Jorge's motive for concealing the part of Aristotle's *Poetics* is a distaste for and fear of laughter:

... laughter is weakness, corruption, the foolishness of our flesh. It is the peasant's entertainment, the drunkard's license ...⁴

He particularly fears that dissemination of this work of Aristotle's would give laughter and the 'low' genre of comedy the *authority* of Aristotle, that writer whom later medieval theologians habitually refer to out of respect simply as 'the philosopher'. For Jorge, laughter is subversive and one of its effects could be to free man from the fear of the devil, who for Jorge is both a necessary contrast to the glory of God and a means of social control,

Laughter frees the villain from fear of the Devil, because in the feast of fools the Devil also appears poor and foolish, and therefore

controllable. But this book could teach that freeing oneself of the fear of the Devil is wisdom.⁵

A few pages later the book's detective and Jorge's opponent, the Franciscan William of Baskerville, turns the tables on Jorge and calls *him* diabolic.

'You are the Devil', William said then.

Jorge seemed not to understand. If he had been able to see, I would say he stared at his interlocutor with a dazed look. 'I?' he said.

'Yes. They lied to you. The Devil is not the Prince of Matter; the Devil is the arrogance of the spirit, faith without smile, truth that is never seized by doubt. The Devil is grim because he knows where he is going, and, in moving, he always returns whence he came. You are the Devil, and like the Devil you live in darkness. If you wanted to convince me, you have failed. I have you, Jorge, and if I could, I would lead you downstairs, across the ground, naked, with a fowl's feathers stuck in your asshole and your face painted like a juggler and a buffoon, so the whole monastery would laugh at you and be afraid no longer.'⁶

William brands as diabolic arrogant authority that never questions itself and he threatens, in a very Bakhtinian way to 'carnivalise' its representative, to burlesque authority by mockery, particularly mockery which overturns its object, turns the world upside-down, and contains reference to what Bakhtin calls the 'bodily lower stratum', i.e. the arse or the genitals. Bakhtin regards carnival laughter as a manifestation of popular folk humour, which is used to subvert authority and officialdom and to bring liberation.

Here, then, are two views of comedy which both talk of the other as diabolic. Both regard laughter as subversive. For Jorge in Eco's novel, comedy is devilish, the work of the Antichrist, subversive of the sacred, the legal and the authoritative: for William comedy is liberating and its repression diabolic. For Jorge the devil is a necessary foil to God's glory and authority: '... the Prince of Darkness was necessary, with his rebellion and his desperation, to make the glory of God shine more radiantly, ...'.⁷ For William the Devil is a figure for arrogance and humourless authority.

I would like to look at the relation of the comic and the demonic in some of the history of demonology, and in two ways: first at the devil and parody, and then at laughter and the growth of scepticism about witchcraft.

At the same time, as a sort of analogue to Bakhtin's dialectic between carnival laughter and authority, I would like intermittently to try and address a recurrent question about the history of witchcraft: how far can we think of witchcraft as a *popular* belief or even practice, and how far is it constructed by, or even constructed *only* by and in, the theories, beliefs and particularly the *writings* of an authoritative learned élite?

II

Among the many strange confessions that the witches of North Berwick made to King James VI in 1590 was the following account of a meeting of witches in a church, which is reported in the pamphlet *Newes from Scotland* (1592?):

Item, the said *Agnis Tompson* confessed that the Divell being then at North Barrick Kerke attending their comming in the habit or likenes of a man, and seeing that they tarried over long, he at their comming enjoyned them all to a pennance, which was, that they should kisse his Buttockes, in signe of duetye to him: which being put over the Pulpit barre, everye one did as he had enjoyned them: and having made his ungodly exhortations, wherein he did greatlye enveighe against the King of Scotland, he received their oathes for their good and true service towards him, and departed: which doone, they returned to Sea, and so home againe.⁸

This incident at the church in North Berwick is a synecdoche for a motif in witchcraft belief: that witches do things backwards and upside down,⁹ and most particularly in the sabbat, the witches' nocturnal gathering, which is reported in treatises and trials from the fourteenth century onwards in continental Europe, and of which the meetings in Scotland in the 1590s may be rare British instances.

According to the Italian Francesco Maria Guazzo, there were candles at the sabbat but black ones, food which was unsatisfying and tasteless, dancing without pleasure, and even the witches' physical deportment was reversed and inverted [see illustration on p. 89]:

... they approach him [i.e. the Devil] to worship him, not always in the same way, but sometimes in entreaty on bended knees, sometimes standing with their backs turned, sometimes kicking their legs up high, their heads not hanging down in front, but thrown back, so that the chin points up at the sky.¹⁰

The inversions continue later at the sabbat:

And when they approach demons to venerate them, they turn their backs, and going backward like crabs they approach with their hands joined upside down and behind them in supplication: when they speak, they fix their gaze on the ground and in this way behave differently from every usual practice of the rest of mankind.¹¹

Behaving 'differently from every usual practice of the rest of mankind' expressed itself in acts thought against nature: sexual practices at the sabbat were supposed to include incest, sodomy, bestiality, demoniality, and in other acts against nature; the murder and sometimes the eating of their own and others' children, and so on. At these meetings witches were said to travesty the doctrines and rites of the church: desecrating the cross, renouncing their baptism, adoring the devil rather than God. In his *Compendium* Guazzo relays an account of a mock imitation of the mass [*missae quoque simulacrum*] given in Florimond de Raemon's *L'Antichrist* (Lyons, 1597). At this sabbat a man in a black cope elevated a slice of blackened turnip rather than the Host, the chalice contained water not wine, and the congregation were sprinkled not with holy water in the *asperges*, but with the urine of the devil who had taken the form of a goat.

How are we to interpret such reports and particularly the one in *Newes from Scotland*? Are the inversions, reversals and travesties to be seen as Bakhtin's carnival burlesque and so evidence in some way of popular culture, sentiment and practice: the people burlesquing authority, carnivalising the everyday norms of society and particularly those of the church? Such was the romantic vision of the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet in his book *La Sorcière* (1862), of witchcraft as the popular voice of protest and defiance against the oppression of feudalism and the church. Or are these reports of the sabbat and its parodic activities signs of the strategies of witch-hunters and demonologists who, like Jorge, construct for their own purposes evil as perverted good? That is, the construction by authority of witches and devils who mock God's authority only testifies to that mockery ultimately paying tribute to the thing it mocks, even as parody does (always does?), to the thing of which it is a ridiculous imitation. So, we might have expected a medieval theologian to imagine among the demonic inhabitants of hell an undistinguished chaos, as the opposite of God's order. For, as Aquinas notes in the *Summa* when thinking about this question, Augustine says order constitutes the meaning

of good and lack of order the meaning of evil. But Aquinas allows distinction and even hierarchy among demons in hell, since in a sense they cannot escape God's order 'and this is in keeping with the divine wisdom that leaves nothing in the universe in disarray'.¹²

If we read the activities in North Berwick in this light, then all sorts of parodies of the orderly and the decorous emerge: kissing the devil's buttocks is a travesty of feudal kisses of submission and the receiving of oaths. The arse protruding from the pulpit perhaps travesties very Protestant notions of the transmission of the word in preaching. But whose parodies would these be: the witches' or their examiners'?

We have one interesting interpretation of this scene and it is that of King James himself, six years later in his treatise *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh, 1597). To understand James's interpretation it is necessary to know that in Exodus 33, Moses, having received the law from God, asks to see his glory. He is told that no man may see God's face and live, but he may only see what the Revised Version of the Bible calls God's 'back', the Geneva Bible 'back partes' and the Vulgate *posteriora mea*. King James writes,

But further, Witches oft times confesses not only his conveening in the Church with them, but his occupying of the Pulpit: Yea, their forme of adoration, to be the kissing of his hinder partes. Which though it seeme ridiculous, yet may it likewise be true, seeing we reade that in *Calicute*, he appearing in forme of a *Goate-bucke*, hath publickly that un-honest homage done unto him, by everie one of the people: So ambitious is he, and greedie of honour (which procured his fall) that he will even imitate God in that parte, where it is said, that *Moyse* could see but the *hinder partes of God, for the brightnesse of his glorie*: And yet that speache is spoken but *anthropopatheian*.¹³

Newes from Scotland offered two interpretations of the kiss the demonologists called the *osculum infame* (see illustration on p. 89): 'a pennance' and a 'signe of duetye'. James, as well as acknowledging both the possibility of the comic ('though it seeme ridiculous') and the parodic ('that un-honest homage') in the action, offers us also the devil as a self-conscious perpetrator of painfully literal burlesques. In his mockery of a metaphoric expression of the manifestation of divine glory at a crucial moment in Scripture and indeed Christian history, he is the demonic



Tum

Francesco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum* Milan, 1608, p.40 (Reproduced with kind permission of the British Library)

parodist of the tag *diabolus simia Dei* (the devil is God's ape). It is perhaps significant that the ape is a frequent image in the middle ages for imitation.¹⁴ It is the excessively meticulous quality of the travesty in James' interpretation that reveals the intention and calls such reports as the description in *Newes from Scotland* into question: the more formal and detailed the parody, the more literary and therefore less likely to reflect anything like popular culture. To extend this idea: some of the most determined and ingeniously disgusting travesties in the literature of witchcraft are those in the so-called 'black mass'. Now although there is extensive evidence for the use in magic, perhaps especially amatory magic, of the sacraments and sacramentalia it is difficult to identify a 'black mass' at any early period, or to suggest that it may have been a parody of the people. The best examples are to be found in obviously literary, indeed almost antiquarian works of French fiction: in the Marquis de Sade's *Justine* (1791) and Huysman's *Là-Bas* (1891). The only substantial instances in trial records are at the end of the seventeenth century in France in a context which is definitely not that of popular culture but Paris of the late 1670s and early 1680s where the suspects include priests and aristocrats.¹⁵

Comedy and parody, as they appear in witchcraft discourse in the sort of examples I have been providing, strengthen the notion of authority and are agents which reinforce the learned discourses of the demonologists. They are descriptions of transgression which, to quote an essay of Eco's on carnival 'remind us of the existence of the rule'.¹⁶

III

English Renaissance plays about witchcraft tend to construct themselves in ways similar to treatises on witchcraft. Both construct the witch in similar ways, but while demonologists usually cite their sources, and conspicuously parade their authorities as part of the argument, playwrights usually keep them silent. Both treatises and plays are often a mosaic of quotations, citations of other texts and treatises on witchcraft, accounts from classical literature, accounts from recent trials. It is by citing the authority of such texts that demonological treatises argue for the existence of witchcraft. That witches exist we have the evidence of the Bible, Circe and Medea in classical antiquity, the accounts of witches' activities confessed at trials, the writings of previous demonologists and so on. Plays

and treatises tend to be made up in the same way, and from a similar variety of texts. Clearly, in John Marston's play *Sophonisba* Erichtho takes her name and some of her disgusting practices (Marston eroticizes Erichtho's dealings with corpses) from the witch of the same name in Lucan's *Pharsalia* Book 6. This passage in Lucan is also cited as classical authority for the reality of witches, by Danaeus, Lavater, and Alexander Roberts, to cite only some treatises in English.¹⁷

Middleton's witches in *The Witch*, first played 1613-6,¹⁸ are constructed from Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), the English translation in 1605 of Pierre Le Loyer, *A Treatise of Specters* and I think, the pamphlet account by 'W W' of the St Osyth trial in Essex, *A True and Just Recorde* (1582). Middleton, it seems to me, actually took Scot's suggestion on p. 542 'let any man with good consideration peruse that booke published by W W'. Traces of accusations of the usual domestic *maleficia* of English trials (cows giving blood, sheep sickening, brewing and baking failing) appear in Middleton's play, particularly concentrated in one speech of Hecate's, alongside the witches' more spectacular and un-English activities, which are those related to the sabbat: aerial flights, manufacture of the flying ointment and debauching young men: 'I have had him thrice in incubus already' says the witch Hecate of one man.¹⁹

Middleton's main source for the witchcraft material in his play was Reginald Scot's sceptical *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, probably the most important agent for the transmission of witchcraft material to Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, and certainly read by Shakespeare and Middleton. Scot attempts to ridicule continental demonological theory, especially as it is found in the Dominican manual *Malleus Maleficarum* and Jean Bodin's *De la Démonomanie*. He quotes and translates from them at length in the hope that the reader will find his abstracts from his continental 'authorities' absurd, and adds ribald and sarcastic asides to his reader. For example, he faithfully and closely translates an extended narrative from the *Malleus* about a Cypriot witch who transformed a young man into an ass, where the witchcraft was detected after three years when the ass fell on its knees on hearing the church bell ring for the elevation of the host,

After three yeares were passed over, in morning betimes he went to towne before his dame; who upon some occasion (of like to make water) staid a little behind. In the meane time being neere to a church, he heard a little saccaring bell ring to the elevation of a

The witch's delay caused by her need 'to make water' is Scot's burlesque addition to what is otherwise a very faithful and lively translation of the *Malleus* throughout this story²¹, as is his Protestant snort in the margin when the ass falls on its knees at the elevation, 'Note the devotion of the asse'. But the very copiousness and wealth of information in Scot's parade of demonological detail with the intention in ridiculing his opponents' authority and authorities meant that the *Discoverie* is where playwrights found substantial accounts of witchcraft practices. As with Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses*, Scot's book provides us and his contemporaries with the fullest account of the practices and beliefs he would see repressed, but must first review or rehearse at length.

IV

I will turn now to an instance where it seems to me the learned discourses of the demonologists are themselves mocked, in Middleton's *The Witch*. It is the idea of comedy and 'authority' I would like to elaborate in relation to the witchcraft 'authorities' that Middleton incorporates into *The Witch*. I have mentioned some of the witchcraft texts that go into Middleton's witch scenes. Their treatment cannot be that of the orthodox demonologists, if anything it may owe something to the scepticism of Reginald Scot. We first see the witches at work in various typically inverted and unnatural practices, squeezing serpents to inhibit virility, sweating over the manufacture of the flying ointment, anticipating the joys of transvection and the pleasures of having in incubus a seventeen-year-old youth. *The Witch* I ii represents witchcraft practices at their most grotesque, unnatural, continental and textual, and they are all culled, like the names of herbs in this scene, from demonological treatises. One could trace the complicated chains of transmission of how they got here: the flying ointment comes largely from Scot's citation of an Italian author Johannes Baptista Neapolitanus, some details of phrasing in the scene ultimately from Innocent VIII's bull *Summis desiderantes* (1484). The entry of Hecate's loutish son Firestone (a character with resemblances to Shakespeare's Caliban), with his jokes about the devil as the first seller of fruit, subverts whatever grotesque impressiveness the scene might have had. Particular witchcraft practices are rewritten: the continental incubus becomes comic, vernacular and prosaic. The inversion in the supposed sexual practices of

witches (demoniality, incest and bestiality) are all burlesqued:

Firestone. . . . Mother, I pray give me leave to ramble abroad tonight with the Nightmare, for I have a great mind to overlay a fat parson's daughter.

Hecate. And who shall lie with me then?

Firestone. The great cat
For one night mother. 'Tis but a night-
Make shift with him for once.²²

Witches and the grotesque monstrosity of the learned recipes for flying-ointment are farcically burlesqued in the same scene in another exchange between Firestone and his mother:

Hecate. What's the news with thee now?

Firestone. There's the bravest young gentleman within and the fineliest drunk; I thought he would have fallen into the vessel. He stumbled at a pipkin of child's grease, reeled against Stadlin,²³ overthrew her, and in the tumbling-cast struck up old Puckle's heels with her clothes over her ears.

Hecate. Hoyday!

Firestone. I was fain to throw the cat upon her to save her honesty, and all little enough. I cried out still, 'I pray be covered!'²⁴

Given the intense concentration of motifs of food, drink, inversion, disorder, slapstick and violent humour and Bakhtin's bodily lower stratum in the unfortunate Puckle, 'carnivalized' might be a more accurate description than burlesqued.

In III iii, Firestone brings his mother magical herbs, gathered eclectically from Scot and Le Loyer. This time the discourse of learned demonology is burlesqued by Firestone's inability to pronounce their Latinate names correctly, or his childish puns:

Hecate. Dear and sweet boy; what herbs hast thou?

Firestone. I have some marmartin and mandragon.

Hecate. *Marmaritin* and *mandragora* thou wouldst say.

Here's *panax* too! I thank thee.

Firestone. My pan aches I am sure
With kneeling down to cut 'em.²⁵

The burlesquing of demonological discourse is perhaps most obvious in V ii. The Duchess approaches Hecate to procure Almachildes' death and enrages the witch with her scepticism about Hecate's power:

Duchess. Canst thou do this?

Hecate. Can I?

Duchess. I mean so closely?

Hecate. So closely do you mean too?

Duchess. So artfully, so cunningly?

Hecate. Worse and worse; doubts and incredulities!

They make me mad. Let scrupulous greatness know:

Cum volui ripis ipsis mirantibus amnes

In fontes rediere suos, concussaue sisto

*Stantia concutio...*²⁶

and she gives us seven and half lines of Medea's speech from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* VII. The issue as to whether Middleton got this citation of Ovid's authority from Scot or Bodin, who also omits the same line of Ovid, is less important than the immediate further deflation of this extraordinary outburst of Latin by Firestone:

I know as well as can be when my mother's mad and our great cat angry: for one spits French then and th'other spits Latin.²⁷

Surely, what is burlesqued here is the learned discourse of witchcraft itself, its language and its use of classical authorities. A list of witchcraft treatises citing these lines of Ovid would be a long one, and the influence of the figure of Medea on the construction of the figure of the witch would be a useful study to undertake. The Renaissance's love of allegorical exposition of such classical figures is no bar to their being cited as historical support for witchcraft by allegorical expositors of poetry. A seventeenth-century English commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* says Ovid's detailed account of Medea's magic shows Medea conforming to 'the seasons and fashions observed by witches in their secret ceremonies'.²⁸

V

I will turn finally to some passages from Fielding's *Tom Jones* and to a point in the middle of the eighteenth century where not only is witchcraft comic, but so is even any attempt at its representation in literature. 'The literature of Queen Anne's reign leaves no doubt that witchcraft had become a standing joke amongst educated people'.²⁹ *Tom Jones* was published 1749 and its main events are set a few years earlier 1745-6. Ten years earlier an act of 1736 repealed the witchcraft act of James I (1604)

and made it impossible to hang witches: the final commitment for witchcraft in England, of Jane Clarke, had been in 1717. As one of Fielding's landladies remarks 'as the parson told us last Sunday, nobody believes in the devil now-a-days'.³⁰ I shall attempt to review some of the things I have been trying to say in relation to some passages from Fielding's novel.

'And pray, sir', says the serjeant, 'no offence I hope; but pray what sort of a gentleman is the devil? For I have heard some of our officers say, there is no such person; and that it is only a trick of the parsons, to prevent their being broke; for if it was publickly known that there was no devil, the parsons would be of no more use than we are in time of peace.'³¹

The serjeant is addressing Tom Jones' servant-companion Partridge, a credulous and superstitious, and probably Catholic, character who believes firmly in the devil and witches. The devil is useful to parsons as soldiers are in time of war. Demonology is described as superstition and the necessity of the devil is seen as a means of re-inforcing authority, and even repressing subversion, depending on the how one glosses 'broke'. It can mean 'bankrupt' as early as 1593 - but it could also mean 'broken' here: reduced, violated, ruptured, that is the devil is an instrument of clerical hegemony.

In XII xi Tom and Partridge (and an unreliable guide) lose their way to Coventry. The scene is one of darkness, horror and rain. Partridge thinks that they passed a witch, to whom they failed to give money ('. . . if ever I saw a witch in all my life, that old woman was certainly one.'³² They see a light in the distance and as they get nearer

they heard a confused sound of human voices; of singing, laughing, and hallowing, together with a strange noise that seemed to proceed from some instruments; but could hardly be allowed the name of music.³³

Partridge's horror increases. I think that the superstitious and terrified Partridge and the more sceptical and humorously detached reader are led to expect a sight of a witches' gathering, perhaps a mild English version of the sabbat. The narrative structure is like that of accounts of a sabbat by those claiming to have happened upon them: an approach in the dark, the sound of revelry and strange music. Anticlimactically, the revellers turn out to be gypsies. And Fielding intervenes in the author's voice to place days of

superstition behind us, and to appeal to the taste of the educated and rational reader.

Had this history been writ in the days of superstition, I should have had too much compassion for the reader to have left him so long in suspense, whether Beelzebub or Satan was about actually to appear in person, with all his hellish retinue; but as these doctrines are at present very unfortunate, and have few if any believers, I have not been much aware of conveying any such terrors. To say truth, the whole furniture of the infernal regions hath long been appropriated by the managers of playhouses, who seem lately to have lain them by as rubbish, capable only of affecting the upper gallery; a place in which few of our readers ever sit.³⁴

The devil and his followers are no longer a fit subject for decorous representation: they can now *only* be vulgarly comic, merely 'furniture', demoted first to the playhouse where they please only the vulgar in the upper gallery, and then fallen into disuse as junk props ('lain them by as rubbish').

The triangular inter-relationship of ideology, laughter and the devil is by no means simple or constant. Even Bakhtin, while arguing the case for his popular carnivalesque laughter as subversive of official ideology and hierarchy, also had to admit the existence of institutionalised rituals of inversion and the world upside-down in the middle ages such as the feasts of fools and asses, and the *risus paschalis*.³⁵ 'Even the church in her wisdom has granted the moment of feast, carnival, fair', as Eco's Jorge of Burgos observes. Such permitted misrule may have had the effect of re-enforcing official ideology and hierarchy rather than subverting it.³⁶ We might choose to see the grotesque inverted practices attributed to witches as analogues to the carefully controlled 'comic' constructions of these medieval feasts - as very curious sorts of *parodia sacra*,³⁷ which, to quote Eco again 'remind us of the existence of the rule'.

Yet the Protestant Reginald Scot turned laughter against papist continental demonologists and their elaborate constructions of witchcraft and the devil. Samuel Harsnet did the same thing in his attacks on both Catholic and Puritan claims to exorcise in late sixteenth - and early seventeenth-century England. Here, interestingly, official ideology (Harsnet was chaplain to the bishop of London) used laughter to reinforce its own ecclesiastical authority by making Catholic exorcisms and accounts of

demonic activity appear ludicrous. Harsnet's attack on exorcisms actually involved making certain ideas of the demonic look ludicrous.³⁸ Part of Harsnet's strategy, as Stephen Greenblatt has argued, was to use the language of the fraudulent theatre to empty exorcism of its power.³⁹ Harsnet relentlessly uses the topos of the theatre to construct exorcism as empty performance: sometimes ludicrous comedy, sometimes incompetent tragedy,

The same *Edmunds*, & his twelve holy disciples, that have feigned a devil Tragedie, sorted it into actes, and scenes, furnished it with hangings, set up a stage of forgerie, replenished it with personated actors. . .⁴⁰

Also in the early seventeenth century, in the grotesque comic representations of the supposed continental practices and demonological discourse in *The Witch*, Middleton staged burlesques of those demonological discourses. And finally, in the mid-eighteenth century when 'nobody believes in the devil now-a-days', Fielding's imagined a scene in a vulgarised theatre to expose the inauthenticity and indeed vulgarity of a belief in Beelzebub, Satan with all their 'hellish retinue'.

Notes

¹ All references are to the English translation by William Weaver (Secker and Warburg: London 1983). The original edition in Italian was in 1980.

² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* tr Helene Iswolsky (MIT Press: Cambridge Mass and London, 1968). The original Russian edition was Moscow, 1965.

³ *The Name of the Rose*, p. 467.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 474.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 474.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 477.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 476.

⁸ King James I, *Daemonologie* (1597). *Newes from Scotland* (1591), ed. G. B. Harrison (Bodley Head Quartos: London, 1924), 14.

⁹ See Stuart Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft' *Past & Present* 87 (1980), 98-127.

¹⁰ '... ad illum accedunt adorandi gratia, non eodem semper modo, sed interdum complicatis genibus supplices, interdum obverso tergo stantes, interdum cruribus etiam in altum iactis, nec capite in anteriorem partem prono, sed resupinato, adeo ut mentum ad coelum feratur'. Francesco Maria Guazzo, *Compendium Maleficarum* (Milan 1608), 40.

This is much expanded in the later edition (Milan 1628) with exclamations of horror at adoration due to God being offered to the devil.

¹¹ 'Cum accedunt ad Daemones eos veneraturi, terga obvertunt, & cessim eum cancrorum more, supplicaturi, manus inversas retro applicant: colloquuturi, in terram figunt obtutum, & id genus alia ab omni consuetudine reliquorum hominum alienissima'. *Ibid*, 45.

¹² 'Convenit etiam hoc divinae sapientiae, quae nihil in universo inordinatum relinquit.' Aquinas, *Summa* la 109 art 2.

¹³ *Daemonologie*, II iii, p. 37.

¹⁴ Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* tr Willard H. Trask (Routledge & Kegan: London, 1953), pp. 538-40.

¹⁵ Documents from the French 'L' Affaire des Poisons', justly termed by their editor 'cet immense dossier', may be found in *Archives de la Bastille*, ed. François Ravaison, vols v-vii (Paris 1872-4). On the black mass generally, see Gerhard Zacharias, *The Satanic Cult* tr Christine Trollope (George Allen & Unwin: London, 1980).

¹⁶ Eco, 'The Frames of Comic "Freedom"' in *Carnival*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Mouton Publishers: Berlin, 1984), p. 6.

¹⁷ Lambert Daneau, *A Dialogue of Witches* (1575), sig C6^v; Ludwig Lavater, *Of Ghostes and Spirites Walking by nyght* ed. J. Dover Wilson and May Yardley (Shakespeare Association, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1929), p. 143; Alexander Roberts, *A Treatise of Witchcraft* (1616), p. 9.

¹⁸ All quotations from this play are taken from the edition in *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays*, ed. Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge (Revels Plays Companion Library, Manchester University Press: Manchester 1986). Generally on this play see Anne Lancashire, 'The Witch: Stage Flop or Political Mistake?' in *Accompanying the Players: Essays celebrating Thomas Middleton, 1580-1980* (AMS Press: New York, 1982) ed. Kenneth Friedenreich, pp. 161-81. For the sources of the witchcraft material see Gareth Roberts, 'A Re-Examination of the Sources of the Magical Material in Middleton's *The Witch*' *Notes & Queries* ns 23 (May-June 1976), pp. 216-9.

¹⁹ *The Witch*, I ii 198.

²⁰ Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), V iii, p. 95.

²¹ The *Malleus* simply has 'Triennio igitur sic elapso, in quarto, scilicet, dum quodam die ante meridiem civitatem praefatam intrasset, & mulier a longe sequeretur . . . '.

²² *The Witch*, I ii 93-8.

²³ The witches' names Stadlin and Hoppe, which Middleton found in Scot, come originally from the *Malleus*.

²⁴ *Ibid*, I ii 184-92.

²⁵ *Ibid*, III iii 24-8.

²⁶ *Ibid*, V ii 14-20.

²⁷ *Ibid*, V ii 30-2.

²⁸ George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd and Represented in Figures* (Oxford, 1632), p 253.

²⁹ R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch-beliefs* (Methuen: London, 1947), p. 187. For some account of the decline in seventeenth-century England of belief in magic, witchcraft and occult sciences see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*

(Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1971), pp. 641-68 and R. Trevor Davies, pp. 181-203.

³⁰ Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones*, ed. R. P. C. Mitter (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1966), XII vi, p. 569.

³¹ *Ibid.*, IX vi, p. 459.

³² *Ibid.*, XII xi, p. 589.

³³ *Ibid.*, XII xii, p. 590.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, XII xii, p. 592.

³⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, pp. 1-58 *passim*.

³⁶ See Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Duckworth: London 1975), esp. pp. 97-187.

³⁷ See Bakhtin, p. 14.

³⁸ On the Protestant propaganda war against both Catholic and Puritan exorcisms see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 477-92 and D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (Scolar Press: London, 1981), pp. 43-84.

³⁹ 'Shakespeare and the exorcists' in *Shakespearean Negotiations: the Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1988), pp. 94-128.

⁴⁰ Samuel Harsnet, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (London 1603), p. 131.

8—

Magna Farta: Walpole and the Golden Rump

Peter Thomson

Henry Fielding's fame as a writer of irregular, topical plays reached new heights with the success of *Pasquin* over the spring and summer of 1736 at the small playhouse in the Haymarket which he had recently leased. The first half of this lively piece admits us to the rehearsal of a studiously inept comedy called 'The Election'. The mayor of a corrupt little borough is under constant pressure - in this respect he is comparable with George II - from his formidable wife and daughter. They are for the Court candidates, Lord Place and Colonel Promise, he for the Country candidates, Sir Henry Fox-chace and Squire Tankard. But his womenfolk browbeat him with the 'promise' of a 'place' if the Court party wins, and he agrees to cheat for their, and perhaps his own, advantage. The Country candidates poll more votes, but the mayor defiantly returns the Court couple. As the documentation of contested elections in the eighteenth century reveals, there was no shortage of factual precedents for this fictional deceit. In 1712, for example, Sir Robert Beachcroft, lord mayor of London, was one of the two Whigs in an aldermanic contest with two Tories for the Langbourn ward. Having exercised his right to appoint himself returning officer, he declared for himself and his fellow-Whig despite the fact that their opponents had won a majority of the votes.¹ Evidences of sharp practice in Chippenham and the city of Westminster during the 1741 election would soon add their own downward thrust to Walpole's fall.

I have begun with *Pasquin* and Beachcroft because the story of the 1737 Licensing Act similarly superimposes fiction on fact more than has been generally realised.² I shall be telling it, for the most part, around two men, Fielding and Walpole, but there are many minor characters and the scenery is largely composed of buttocks. To examine the first of several

bums, I need to ratchet back ten years from my starting-point in 1736. So far as I know, 1726 was an unremarkable year in the English theatre. The non-juring scourge of Restoration drama, Jeremy Collier, died as, with a characteristically witty sense of timing, did Sir John Vanbrugh, whom Collier had sought to excoriate. There was no active playwright of anything like Vanbrugh's brilliance, and the obituarists who lamented his passing lamented also the debased taste that was now exhibited by the popularity of John Rich's pantomimes at his playhouse in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Towards midsummer, George I embarked on another of his regular visits to Hanover, and, on 26 August, the most powerful of the King's prime ministers celebrated his fiftieth birthday. Walpole had reason to feel secure. He had the confidence of his royal master and the loyalty of an attractive mistress, half his age. For over a year, Maria Skerrett had been living on the fringe of Richmond Park, in a house which Walpole had handsomely refurbished for her and their illegitimate daughter. The liaison was an open secret as were the amours of Walpole's lawful wife. It was, after all, a complacently venereal age. But 1726 was also the year in which the literary onslaught on Walpole began in earnest. The first printing of the *Craftsman* took place in December. In its columns, Bolingbroke and Pulteney would sustain for a decade a weekly campaign that created the concept of opposition as an *activity*.³ Two months earlier, Walpole had made his bow as Flimnap, the High Treasurer of Lilliput. Book One of *Gulliver's Travels* was the imaginative wonder of the year. Among many others, it lured Hogarth, who published in December 1726 a fanciful satirical print which he called 'The Political Clyster'.⁴ It shows a clutch of grotesque Lilliputians inserting a clyster into the rectum of a Gulliver whose only visible bodily part is his buttocks. There is no licence for such an image in Swift's account of Gulliver's experiences in Lilliput. It is, presumably, the man-mountain's punishment for dowsing the palace fire with his urine. Such in these graceless times, Hogarth is proclaiming, is the caring man's reward for disinterested service to the country. On the ruined arch a rat feeds on a baby (Swift's 'Modest Proposal' enacted by a rodent) and a sculpted satyr is being worshipped behind the arch's frame. Just above Gulliver's right buttock, a strikingly realistic figure, wearing a startled expression, is sitting in a chamber pot. I offer no identification, but, if there is an actual likeness in this print, this is surely it. Hogarth's clyster is an early example of a recurring image in Hanoverian caricature.

He might, I suppose, have claimed some authority for his invention in Swift's notoriously obsessive scatology, but the idea of displaying the human rump is curiously persistent in the scurrilous art of the eighteenth century, from Hogarth through to Rowlandson. Consider a later satirical print, 'Idol-Worship: or The Way to Preferment'.⁵

This is Walpole himself in 1740, the year before a perilous but constitutionally unavoidable election and well past his climacteric. One would-be office-holder has doffed his hat to kiss the giant buttock of the great man. A second, having already completed that ceremony, is driving a hoop, whose rim is marked off in sections of Wealth, Pride, Vanity, Luxury, Want, Dependence, Servility, Venality, Corruption and Prostitution, under Walpole's lowered breeches towards the distant arches of the Treasury, the Exchequer and the Admiralty. The caption makes a familiar derogatory comparison of Walpole to Wolsey and, less aptly, George II to Henry VIII, who:

made unto himself a great IDOL [whose legs were] as an Arch stretched forth over the Doors of all the Publick Offices in the Land, & whomsoever went out, or whomsoever came in passed beneath & with Idolatrous Reverence lift up their Eyes, & Kissed the Cheeks of the Postern.

Interestingly enough, there is a quite plausible connection with Gulliver in Lilliput here. The Emperor:

desired I would stand like a *Colossus*, with my legs as far asunder as I conveniently could. He then commanded his General. . . . to draw up the Troops in close Order, and march them under me. . . . His Majesty gave Orders, upon Pain of Death, that every Soldier in his March should observe the strictest Decency, with regard to my Person; which, however, could not prevent some of the younger Officers from turning up their Eyes as they passed under me. And, to confess the Truth, my Breeches were at that Time in so ill a Condition, that they afforded some opportunities for Laughter and Admiration.

This anonymous print, like that excerpt from Swift, probably achieves a silent prurience, implying more than it actually depicts through the phallic shadow cast by the empty sentry-box on the left. No holds were barred in the opposition onslaught on Walpole the Great.

The history of Fielding's enrolment in that opposition is confused. Late

in the 1730s, on the dubious authority of Walpole's propaganda purveyors, it was widely rumoured that Walpole had once paid a substantial sum to bail Fielding out of one of his many youthful scrapes with the law. Given Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's closeness to both men, it is just possible that the 'rumour' recorded an instance in which she acted as mediator, but the mature Fielding would not have seen the debt as binding. It was never Fielding's custom to feel bound by debts. He had not long left Eton when *Gulliver's Travels* was published and he seems to have read it enthusiastically, but with an unpolitical eye. It was Swift's satirical verse rather than his finer prose that inspired *The Masquerade* (1728), his first publication. This is a young man's (Fielding was twenty years old when it was published) easy satire of the masquerades organised by John Jacob Heidegger on the stage of the King's Theatre in the Haymarket on nights when the Italian opera company was not performing. The title page boasted, as Fielding's *nom de plume*, 'Lemuel Gulliver, Poet Laureate to the King of Lilliput', but he had, in truth, little in common with Swift, or with any of the other members of the 'Scriblerus Club'. He did not share their association with William Pulteney, the eloquent leader of the Whigs in opposition, nor was he a visitor to Dawley Farm, the rural retreat of Viscount Bolingbroke, the dispossessed Tory whose supple intellect contrived to justify opposition to Walpole as true patriotism. Had Fielding been politically alert in 1726, he would have kept in closer touch with his fellow-Etonians, George Lyttelton and William Pitt, but how was he to know they would be tomorrow's men? In background, upbringing and temperament, Fielding was probably closer to Walpole than to any of them. Like Walpole, he was prone to think of all Tories as Jacobites and to loathe them cordially. Above all at the end of the 1720s, he was anxious to cure his 'very low condition of Purse'. If he was lucky to get his first play staged at Drury Lane, he was unlucky in the timing. *Love in Several Masques* opened on 16 February 1728 when the furore over *The Beggar's Opera* at the rival Lincoln's Inn Fields playhouse was at its height. Gay's ballad opera had opened on 29 January, and its originality had been quickly recognised. Fielding would later benefit from Gay's trick of satirising Walpole in several guises - as Macheath, as Peachum, even as Lockit. Soon after his own play closed, he embarked at Harwich on his way to the University of Leiden, and his literary career was, for the moment, interrupted. While in Holland, he wrote a verse satire in three cantos. The

style imitated was Pope's, but Pope, together with his publisher and the whole tribe of contributors to *The Craftsman*, was a principal object of the satire.⁶ In 1729, when he returned to England, Fielding was firmly Walpole's man. His immediate ambition was to take by storm the London stage, which had lost its last remaining luminary playwrights with the death, in 1729, of Congreve and Steele. Almost the only man likely to contest that view was another of Walpole's men, Colley Cibber, still active as one of the actor-managers at the staunchly Whig Drury Lane. It was there that Fielding hoped to relaunch his theatrical career, but Cibber rejected two of the young man's plays and made himself an enemy. Of the four plays Fielding saw produced in 1730, none was staged in the self-styled home of the English drama. He had to turn, instead, to two lesser theatres, Henry Giffard's in Goodman's Fields and the Little Theatre, recently built opposite the grandiose opera house in the Haymarket. The status of both these playhouses was problematic, since neither could claim a share in the Letters Patent issued by Charles II in 1662. The royal patents promised their original recipients a monopoly on all performances of legitimate drama (which was taken to mean all spoken, as opposed to sung or danced, plays) in the city of Westminster. In the intervening fifty years, they had passed through so many hands that the royal lustre had worn thin, but Drury Lane, by custom if not by due process, laid claim to one and John Rich at Lincoln's Inn Fields (transferred to Covent Garden in 1732) to the other. The complexities were of the kind that makes lawyers rich and litigants hungry, but the illegitimate playhouses were never safe from sudden injunctions or periodic prosecutions. The outrageous success of his *Tom Thumb* at the Haymarket theatre increased Fielding's bitterness towards Cibber, in whom he had hoped to find a patron. He expressed his *malaise* in a familiar verse letter to Walpole:

If you should ask, what pleases best?
To get the most and do the least,
What fittest for? - you know, I'm sure
I'm fittest for - a sinecure.

At this time, supposedly, Fielding was an occasional attendant at Walpole's levees, and the beguilingly casual letter may have disguised a real hope that the great man would provide the patronage that Cibber had denied. There is no evidence that he did. Cibber it was who carried home the bacon. His appointment as Poet Laureate in 1730 thrust Fielding into



The Political Clyster (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)

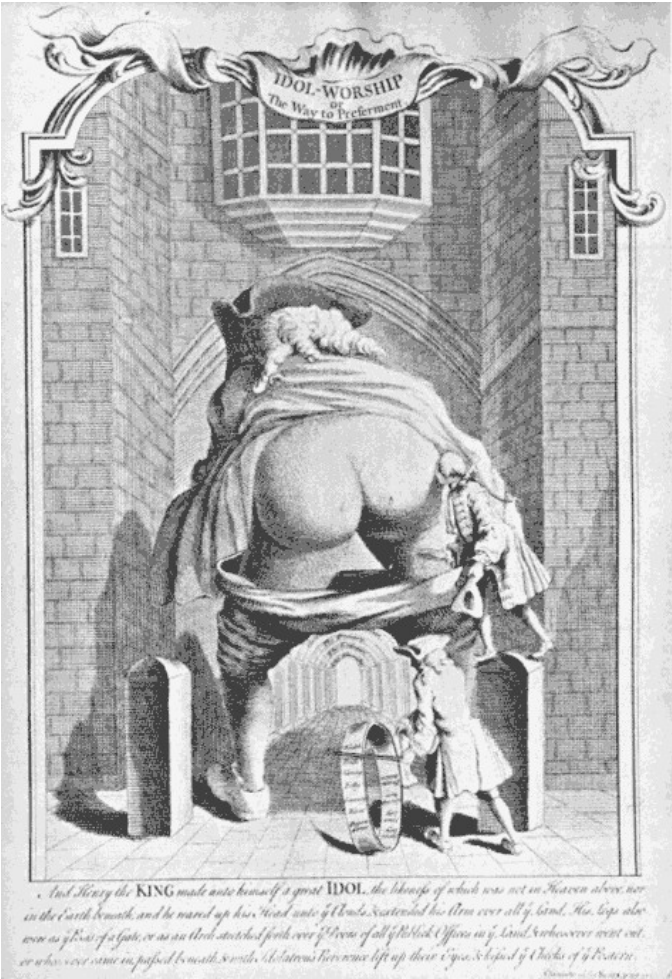
literary, if not yet into political, association with the opposition.

Even at the time, it was a critical commonplace that all the best writers were in the ranks of the opposition. In political terms, it is much more important to recognise this assumption than to justify it. For anyone who aspired higher than Grub Street, as Fielding certainly did, the opposition beckoned. The Court was a blank wall. George II loved opera, laughed at Rich's pantomimes and slept through tragedies. Queen Caroline indulged in theology and enjoyed conversation, not least with Walpole, but betrayed her defective taste in poetry by her advocacy of the bathetic Stephen Duck. As for Walpole, his sure taste in visual art and architecture was mostly a secret whilst his distaste for men of letters was well advertised. In a commentary on the death of George II, Walpole's bookish son Horace betrays the persuasiveness of a view shared by his father and the King he served:

Bookish men have censured his neglect of literature - a reflection that at least is evidence that public utility is not the sole purport of their labours. But the advantages resulting to their country from authors must be better ascertained, before the imputation becomes a grave one. Had he pensioned half a dozen poets, and reaped their incense, the world had heard of nothing but his liberality. . . . In truth, I believe King George would have preferred a guinea to a composition as perfect as Alexander's Feast.⁷

Horace Walpole's approbation of George II's (and Walpole's) attitude to poets would have been thought merely perverse in 1721, but his father's period of power had brought about an anti-cultural revolution. Until the age of Walpole, writers were at the heart of the civilised court, but the great man's endorsement of Hanoverian philistinism changed all that. Swift dubbed him 'Bob, the Poet's Foe', but Swift was rarely surprised by even the worst a Whig could do. The initial reaction of other writers was incredulity, gradually thinning out through the 1720s into despair. Pope's *Dunciad* of 1728 is, among many other things, a scream of pain. But it was the appointment of Colley Cibber as Poet Laureate that confirmed the sunken status of literature. *The Grub-Street Journal* of 24 December 1730 took to verse:

In ancient days, when pensions, bribes and screens
Were things unknown in Senate, and at Court;
Then was the glorious time, when Kings and Queens



And Henry the KING made unto himself a great IDOL, the likeness of which was set in Heaven above, nor in the Earth beneath, and he raised up his Head unto it, bowed, stretched his Arm over all it, kissed, His legs also were as pillars of a gate, or as an Ark stretched forth over it, from of old of the best Officers in it, and whosoever went out, or who ever came in passed beneath it with Adulations there were left up their eyes, & legs of it, & knees.

Idol-Worship or The Way to Preferment (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)

For pride kept Poets, and kept Fools for sport:
But now frugality, which bears such rule,
Joins pride and sport, a POET and a FOOL.

The implicit association of Cibber with Walpole himself quickly became a theatrical cliché. Walpole's laureate could stand for Walpole himself. Fielding could reflect on the further possibilities of his successful incorporation of Cibber in his admired spring offering at the Haymarket, *The Author's Farce* (1730). As Paul Langford has tellingly indicated,

One of the reasons why the theatrical mode of criticism was so powerful was that it reinforced a popular belief that the existing regime was by its very nature in a sense false, deceiving and theatrical.⁸

A satirical print in the form of a playbill greeted the post-excite parliament of 1735 as a farce featuring the 'blundering' Walpole brothers, 'with the cheats of RABBI ROBIN' and the promise of Walpole's downfall in another of his frequent historical personae, that of Sejanus.⁹ Fielding, with the substitution of Wolsey for Sejanus, makes precisely the same comparison of Walpole's excise bill to a farce in *Eurydice Hissed* (1737):

And Wolsey's self, that mighty minister,
In the full height and zenith of his power,
Amid a crowd of sycophants and slaves,
Was but perhaps the author of a farce,
Perhaps a damned one too.

But this is to move too quickly to a Fielding in confirmed opposition to Walpole and his 'scribblers who for hire / Would write away their country's liberties'. We cannot be wholly confident that, even as late as 1732, Fielding would not have settled for the cash reward consequent on employment as one of Walpole's scribblers. Before the excise crisis, he was in no hurry to burn his boats, although he sailed them close to the wind in 1731.

On 22 April of that year, his twenty-fourth birthday, Fielding's most daring play to date opened at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket. *The Welsh Opera* has more mischief than malice, but it takes extraordinary liberties with the royal family. Fielding presented to eager audiences a henpecked George II, a pretentious Queen Caroline and a lecherous but impotent Frederick, Prince of Wales. They are given a Welsh domicile and a Welsh surname, Apshinken, which, for those who knew their Welsh



The Festival of the Golden Rump (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)

prefixes and Hanoverian nouns, signified 'son of ham'. They are also given a set of household servants supervised by a light-fingered butler called Robin (Walpole's stage-name) whose institutional adversary is William (Pulteney), the coachman. It was sufficiently successful as an afterpiece to encourage Fielding to extend it to three acts (with sixty-five songs, only four fewer than in *The Beggar's Opera*). The Prince of Wales had been in England for a little over two years, having spent the previous fourteen isolated from his immediate family in Hanover. His parents' hatred of him has never been adequately explained. Nor can I account for Fielding's contempt for him. There was talk about town that Frederick boasted of sexual conquests but made none and Fielding's jibes may have been part of the empty ritual of competitive manliness. They were almost exactly the same age, and neither had yet 'come out' politically, but the Prince had a natal right of access to the centres of power for which Fielding yearned. Was it, then, mere envy rationalised into contempt that inspired Fielding's portrait of Master Owen Apshinken, 'almost half a man, and more than half a beau'? *The Welsh Opera*, given its explosive subject-matter, excited surprisingly little comment in either the opposition or the ministerial press. Its politics were too slippery, perhaps. But there can be no doubt that it was much talked about. I assume that Fielding took his decision to call the three-act version *The Grub-Street Opera* in order to camouflage it from governmental scrutiny. But Walpole's spies, though inconsistent, could be vigilant when occasion demanded. They had prevented performances of Gay's innocuous *Polly* in 1729. *The Grub-Street Opera* was **not** innocuous, any more than television's *Spitting Image* is innocuous anyway. Its production was proscribed, and Fielding had to make to with publishing it.

Something of great importance is at issue here. During the post-Revolution period, the Licensing Act, with its stipulated pre-censorship of printed matter, was allowed to lapse. The great newspaper boom that followed transformed the political complexion of the country. The freedom of the press was a symbol of the Whig commitment to the liberty of the people. But the legal authority of Charles II's theatrical Letters Patent had not lapsed, so that the courts were almost certain, if tested, to uphold the pre-censorship by the Lord Chamberlain of performance texts. The general wisdom of theatre managers was to rely on an element of slippage from the 1695 expiry of the Licensing Act into the office of the Lord Chamberlain's



Brother Robert under his Last Purgation (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)

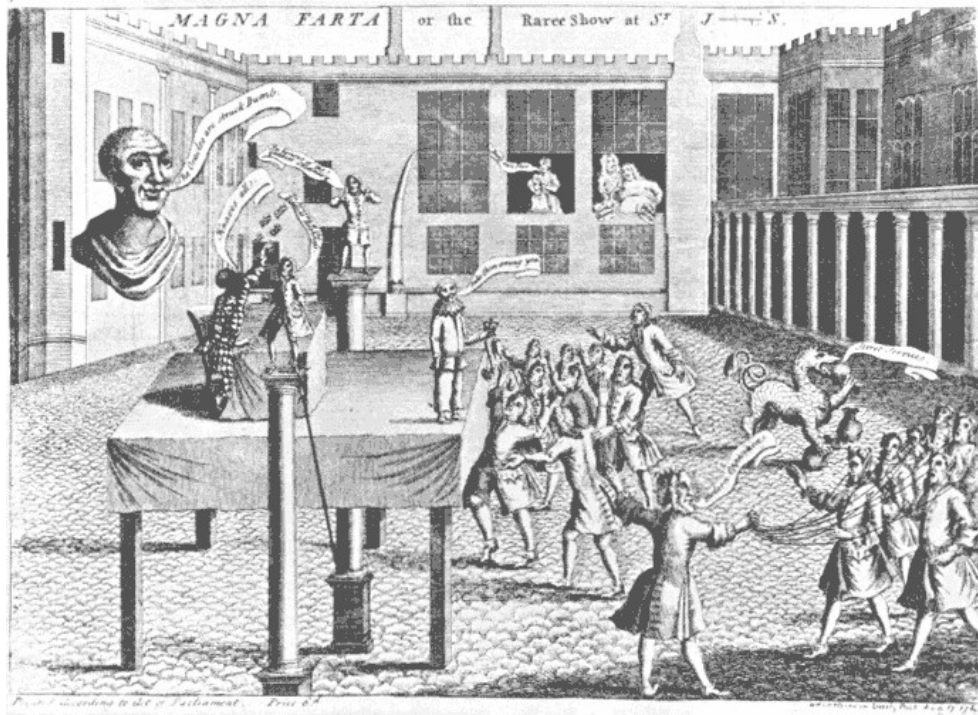
examiners of plays. Certainly, Fielding did not submit any of his Haymarket texts for scrutiny, trusting that a law in abeyance was almost as safe as no law at all. The position of the patent houses was stronger, but not always helpfully so. The Letters Patent had failed to spell out the precise balance of power between the patent-holders and the Chamberlain's office, but when Richard Steele claimed for Drury Lane a legal exemption from censorship, he was deprived of his office there. One of Walpole's earliest libertarian gestures, when he came to power in 1721, was to restore Steele to his post.¹⁰ Over the next decade, the ministry interfered sporadically in theatrical affairs, as in the matter of *Polly*, but the banning of *The Grub-Street Opera* signalled a greater interventionism, although the shift was not immediately recognised. The intemperance of George II may have been a contributing factor, but even the broadbacked Walpole was smarting under the lash of opposition satire by 1730. *The Craftsman* had a print-run of 13,000 and claimed that each copy was read by forty people in coffee-houses and taverns.¹¹ It was joined in 1727 by the *London Evening Post*, in 1728 by *Fog's Weekly Journal* and in 1730 by the *Grub-Street Journal*. To begin with, Walpole was content to provide a modest counter-press on behalf of the ministry, spicing his campaign with occasional prosecutions of libelling journalists. *Mist's Weekly Journal*, for example, was closed down in 1728, when its Jacobite proprietor Nathaniel Mist was forced to flee the country, and *The Craftsman* was almost as often in trouble as *Private Eye* is now. But the tone of the pro-government papers in the 1720s was overwhelmingly complacent. The *British Journal* for 31 Mar 1729 answered *The Craftsman's* charges of corruption with:

Men are always corrupt, and must often be manag'd. . . .

Corruption is good or bad in its Effects as good or bad governors apply it.¹²

After 1731, however, the expenditure on ministerial propaganda increased sharply, in line with the new interventionism.¹³ At the same time, the loyal Treasury solicitor Nicholas Paxton was asked to sniff out and, where useful, prosecute libels. Opposition fears that Walpole was waiting the opportunity to re-impose a Licensing Act may have been misplaced, but they were scarcely surprising. The fate of the press's more vulnerable sister, the theatre, might be an indicator.

Nothing in Fielding's behaviour in 1731-2 suggests that he perceived *The Grub-Street Opera* as a storm-centre. That, in itself, is evidence of its

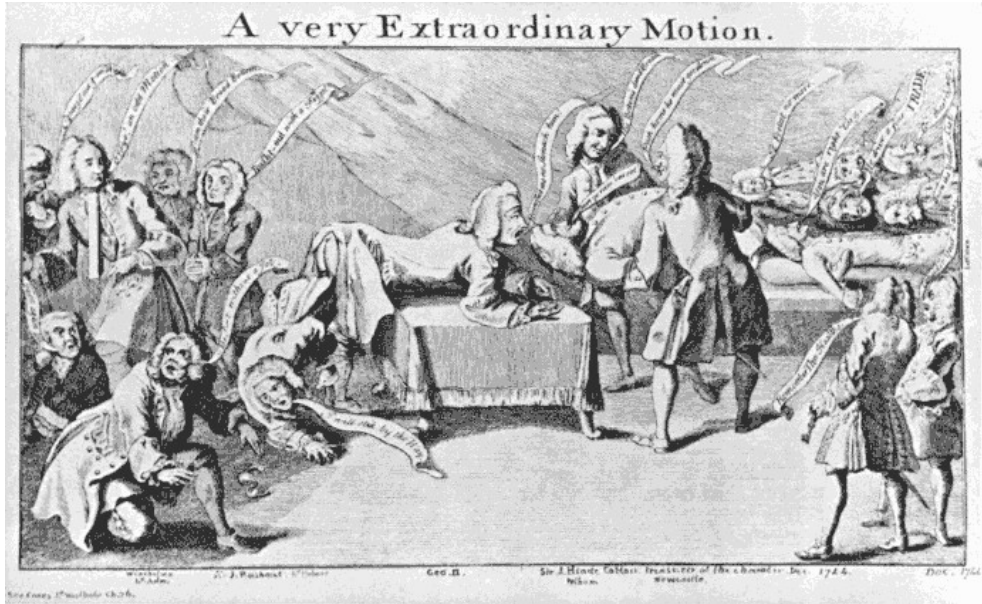


Magna Farta (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)

political innocence. To be sure, Walpole is presented as venal, but so is Pulteney. Puzzletext, the Apshinkens' chaplain, speculates that, 'if Robin the butler hath cheated more than other people, I see no other reason for it, but because he hath had more opportunity to cheat', and that is a fair enough conclusion to draw from the play. Walpole was always disarmingly willing to admit his imperfections, and it seems to me more likely that he was making a gesture of solidarity with the King and Queen than protecting himself when he stepped in to ban performance of this predominantly jolly ballad opera. Now that Colley Cibber had retired from active management at Drury Lane, Fielding was keen to re-establish himself there, and the playhouse's political colouring was no deterrent. Even while *The Welsh Opera* was teasing Walpole at the Haymarket in April 1731, Fielding's epilogue to Lewis Theobald's Walpolean *Orestes* was being spoken at Drury Lane, and in January 1732, another epilogue by Fielding concluded a piece made notable by its vexed provenance rather than by its contents. *The Modish Couple's* supposed author was a Captain Bodens, commissioned in the foot-guards and serving as a gentleman usher to George II. It was strongly rumoured that the Prince of Wales and Lord Hervey had both had a hand in its composition. *Biographia Dramatica* records the play's fate:

Party seems to have influenced the public opinion concerning this play, though there is nothing in it, one might suppose, likely to give any offence. A contemporary writer says, that the friends of the author, who were people of quality, exerted themselves in an extraordinary manner in its favour, and met with as remarkable an opposition; nothing being heard throughout the whole play but hollaing, clapping, hissing, and catcalls. The author's friends, however, prevailed in carrying it to a third night; but, attempting it the fourth time, the confusion became so great, that the audience were forced to be dismissed.¹⁴

It was the politics of the audience, not of the play, that caused the disturbance on this occasion. Hervey's support of Walpole had been made notorious by his duel with Pulteney almost exactly a year earlier. The Prince of Wales, on the other hand, was being increasingly courted by the opposition. The friendship of Hervey and Frederick would turn to bitter enmity, on Hervey's part at least, before the end of 1732, when both would claim to have impregnated one of the Queen's maids of honour. Between



A Very Extraordinary Motion (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)

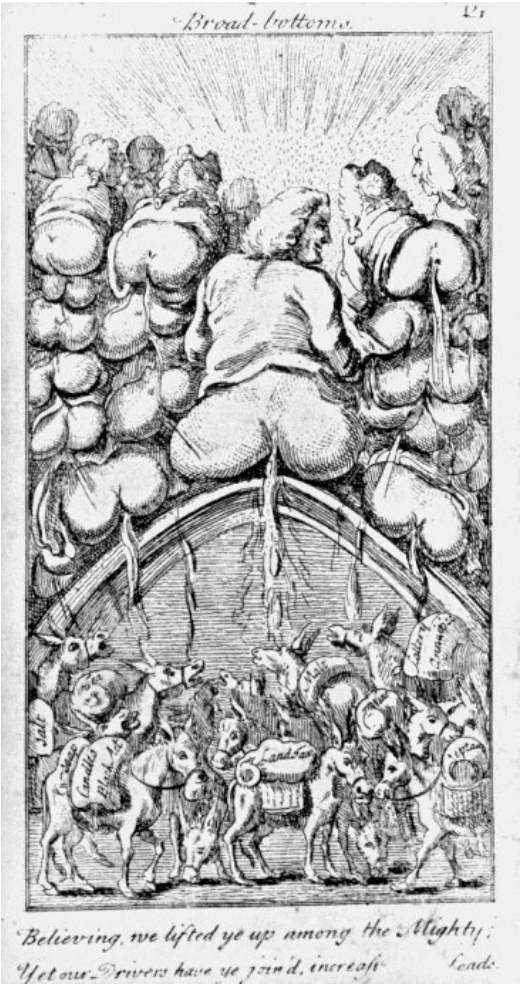
Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the fragile text of *The Modish Couple* was crushed. But what on earth brought Fielding into such company? It is impossible to observe his strenuous attempts, at this time, to keep a foot in both camps, without fearing that he will do himself an injury. Was he unaware that the camps were moving further and further apart?

Much has been made of the fact that Fielding dedicated his next Drury Lane play, *The Modern Husband*, to Walpole, a dedication published more or less contemporaneously with the comedy's first performance on 14 February 1732. It has, I believe, been misread. Far from being a further bid for patronage, it is in fact a statement, lightly veiled in irony, of ultimate mistrust of Walpole. 'Sir', it begins:

While the peace of Europe, and the lives and fortunes of so great a part of mankind, depend on your counsels, it may be thought an offence against the public good to divert, by trifles of this nature, any of those moments which are so sacred to the welfare of our country. But, however ridiculed or exploded the Muses may be, in an age when their greatest favourites are liable to the censure and correction of every boy or idiot who shall have it in his power to satisfy the wantonness of an evil heart at the expense of the reputation and interest of the best poet, yet has this science been esteemed, honoured, protected, and often professed by the greatest persons of antiquity. Nations and the Muses have generally enjoyed the same protectors.

Can this be anything but disingenuous? If Nations and the Muses have *generally* enjoyed the same protectors, why should this age be so different? If Walpole is caring for the nation, why is he neglecting its poets? Or, as Swift and Pope would certainly have insisted, is not his neglect of the poets symptomatic of his neglect of the nation? The attacks on Walpole in the 1730s become so generalised that they are often indiscernible to the modern reader. For 'corruption' read Walpole. For 'cowardice' (as exemplified in his craven preservation of 'the peace of Europe') read Walpole. For venality (as shown in his self-enrichment through public office) read Walpole. Still protected by the wicked innocence of irony, in the dedication to *The Modern Husband* Fielding is preparing himself for opposition. It is reasonable to suppose that it was the excise crisis that was his eventual Rubicon.

Although Walpole did not actually introduce his excise scheme to the



Broad Bottoms (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum)

House of Commons until 14 March 1733, excise had been the hidden agenda since the King's speech opened the parliamentary session on 16 January. Fielding's only new play for 1733 - he had produced five in 1732 - was his version of *The Miser*. Drury Lane was in crisis and so was the whole country. For most people, and certainly for Fielding, the excise issue was only incidentally to do with economics. It was a triumph of the opposition polemicists to ensure that Walpole's excise scheme was viewed by vociferous portions of the population as a threat to the nation's liberty. Not since the harshness of the rewritten Riot Act of 1715 (the 'Bill of Riots' as it was termed by the Tory satirist Charles Hornby ¹⁵) had the Whigs so laid themselves open to the charge of wishing to enslave John Bull. By the end of the summer of 1733, Fielding, like countless other country gentlemen, was, in Bolingbroke's subtle definition, a 'patriot', possessed of a 'zeal to maintain the liberty and to restore the ancient prosperity of Great Britain'. ¹⁶ So, of course, with zeal tempered to something a little less energetic, was Walpole. But the anger generated by the excise debate enabled the opposition to hijack patriotism. The Riot Act was read to 'patriotic' mobs up and down the country, oral evidence that the ministry feared a free people. The Robinocracy was exposed as a tyranny sustained by placemen and pensioners. H. T. Dickinson refers to a cartoon which I have not yet traced. It shows 'hordes of servile creatures queuing to kiss Walpole's bare rump from which dropped a stream of golden guineas'. ¹⁷

Now, the word 'rump' had a special significance for anyone who celebrated the restoration of the monarchy, and I should say something about it before going any further. It was the dissolution of the Rump Parliament that paved the way for the Convention Parliament to recall Charles II. Men of property bought rumps for the populace to roast in celebration. ¹⁸ Again in 1680, at the height of the Exclusion crisis, Westminster Tories proposed a public burning of the Rump 'to orchestrate loyalism in a popular idiom'. ¹⁹ During the rebellion of 1715, 'Down with the Rump' was a Jacobite street-slogan, and even the bonfires that greeted the dissolution of Walpole's four parliaments were open to interpretation as 'imitating the Rejoicings which were made at the Dissolution of Oliver's Rump Parliament'. ²⁰ For Jacobite Tories, then, the rump was at once a symbol of party solidarity and anti-Whig derision. Anti-Jacobites might counter it with a warming-pan (to cast doubt on the Pretender's legitimacy

by reference to the old canard that James II's 'son' had had to be smuggled into St James's Palace in a warming-pan) or a calf's head (to mock the 'martyrdom' of Charles I). Behind the display, so common in eighteenth-century political prints, of the buttocks as a vividly substantial part of the human anatomy, there always lingers the figurative connotation of a contemptible remnant. Walpole, who found the Jacobite threat an ever-present help in trouble, would no doubt have liked to use the rump against the Tories, but it was an unreliable signifier. That was made clear on 15 January 1734, when a group of disaffected peers, who felt that the King had turned his back on them, founded the Rumpsteak Club. Their alternative title was the Liberty Club. However obscurely, the rump was somehow associated, in the eighteenth-century imagination, with threatened liberty. It was in this way that the buttocks of the King and his prime minister came to serve opposition caricaturists. The suggestion, at its most scurrilous, was that they were prepared to shit on the people as the minister does in the bottom-right panel of George Bickham's 'Skit on Britain' (1740-1). ²¹ Three fawning placemen bow and scrape while Walpole shits on a map of England. The verses at the foot of the panel refer to the war against Spain:

Can any mortal chuse but laugh outright
To see a pack of fools engag'd in Fight,
While I as sly as Reynard in his Hole
Sit warm & snugg & pick up all the Cole.
In this Dispute, who e'er the Victors be
Sh-t on my Country it concerns not me,
For I long since my ample Baggs have Cramm'd
And now - I care not if my Country's D-mn'd.

On only one occasion did Walpole effectively employ the rump against his opponents, to bring about the Stage Licensing Act of 1737, and that we shall come to in due course.

The excise crisis, whilst certainly a watershed in Walpole's political career, was also a triumph for the system he had slowly developed over twelve years in office. It was a system that allowed him to defeat the opposition by conceding to it. An administration of unrivalled unpopularity went to the hustings in 1734 and won handsomely. As Paul Langford neatly summarises, 'the electorate had done its worst and failed'.²² None the less, Walpole was wounded. Over the next eight years of his ministry, he was constrained (or **felt** constrained, and how is that different in

politics?) to operate almost exclusively as a power-broker. The excise issue had further undermined the old distinctions between Whig and Tory - Pulteney even paired himself with a Tory for the Middlesex election of 1734 - and strengthened new ones, between Court and Country, 'placemen' and 'patriots'. It was hard for the Robinocracy, with its back to the wall, to conceal the deviousness of its negotiations. For a dispirited opposition, the degradation of public standards seemed irresistible. *The Craftsman* lost its edge, Bolingbroke would soon desert England for France and Pulteney confided in Swift his conviction that 'our constitution is already gone, and we are idly struggling to maintain, what in truth has long been lost. . . . After this, what hopes can there ever possibly be of success?' ²³ For Fielding, whatever his own misdemeanours, the greater wickedness of the Robinocracy was its knock-on effect on personal standards of behaviour. The much-revised *Don Quixote in England* was staged at the Haymarket theatre in April 1734, when election fever was at its height. In published form, it carried a dedication to the Earl of Chesterfield:

. . . one who hath so gloriously distinguished himself in the cause of liberty, to which the corruption I have here endeavoured to expose may one day be a very fatal enemy.

'The freedom of the stage,' Fielding continued with a hint of prescience, 'is, perhaps, as well worth contending for as that of the press'. It is reasonable to read into the choice of dedicatee a new political resolve in Fielding. I would speculate that, when the results of the election were made known, he found himself part of a despairing intelligentsia, disempowered and failing in ways that are all too familiar in the aftermath of Thatcherism. He was twenty-seven, moderately famous and, because he was immoderately indulgent, poor. He spent the election summer in Salisbury and then, after a long and often penurious courtship, married Charlotte Cradock in November. The next year, he was comparatively inactive, living the life of a country squire in East Stour, where he received reports of Sir John Barnard's attempt to bring a Playhouse Bill before the House of Commons. Barnard was a wine-importer, inevitably a vehement opponent of the excise scheme, but an independent Whig of long standing. His adversaries taxed him with Jacobite sympathies. But it should be noted that he received support in the debate of 5 March 1735 from such prominent opposition Whigs as Samuel Sandys and Pulteney, from Sir Joseph Jekyll, a Dissenter and therefore a Walpole Whig - and from

Walpole himself. The occasion is reported as follows in *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons* (Volume IX, pp.93-4):

Sir John Barnard mov'd for bringing in a Bill for restraining the Number of Houses for playing of Interludes, and for the better regulating Common Players of Interludes. In Support of this Motion he represented the Mischief done to the City of London by the Play-Houses, in corrupting the youth, encouraging Vice and Debauchery, and being prejudicial to Trade and Industry; and how much these Evils would be increas'd, if another Play-House should be built in the very Heart of the City. ²⁴ Sir John Barnard was seconded by Mr Sandys, and supported by Mr Pulteney, Sir Robert Walpole, Sir Joseph Jekyll, Sir Thomas Saunderson, and several other Members; Mr James Ereskine in particular reckon'd up the number of Play-Houses then in London, viz. The Opera-House, the French Play-House in the Hay-Market, and the Theatres in Covent-Garden, Drury-Lane, Lincoln's-Inn-Fields, and Goodman's-Fields; and added, 'That it was no less surprizing than shameful, to see so great a Change for the Worse in the Temper and Inclinations of the British Nation, who were now so extravagantly addicted to lewd and idle Diversions, that the Number of Play-Houses in London was double to that of Paris; That we now exceeded in Levity even the French themselves, from whom we learned these and many other ridiculous Customs, as much unsuitable to the Mien and Manners of an Englishman or a Scot, as they were agreeable to the Air and Levity of a Monsieur: That it was astonishing to all Europe, that Italian Eunuchs and Singers should have set Salaries, equal to those of the Lords of the Treasury and Judges of England.' After this it was order'd, *Nem. Con.* That a Bill be brought in pursuant to Sir John Barnard's Motion; which was done accordingly: But it was afterwards dropt, on Account of a Clause offer'd to be inserted in the said Bill, for enlarging the Power of the Lord Chamberlain, with Regard to the Licensing of Plays.

This fascinating precis, behind which hovers the Whig nightmare of the idle apprentice, offers important evidence of Walpole's capacity to benefit from failure. Barnard's Bill was never brought in, not because there was any opposition to the plan to limit the number of playhouses but because of the additional clause promoting the censorship of plays. Yet more sensitive

to satirical attacks after the excise crisis than he had been in the years immediately before it, Walpole was forewarned of the problems he would encounter in his plans to muzzle the theatre. He bided his time.

Far too improvident to survive for long on his mother-in-law's modest bequest, and heartened by the dropping of Barnard's Bill, Fielding took out a lease on 'the French Play-house in the Hay-Market' in January 1736. In association with the politically active James Ralph, he established there 'The Great Mogul's Company of Comedians'. Their first and greatest success was *Pasquin*, which opened on 5 March 1736. The play was not then, nor is it now, generally interpreted as fiercely partisan. But the unrecorded responses of its first audiences would probably have told a different story. Fielding may well have been aware that Walpole, as long ago as 1722, had sponsored a political journal under the title of *Pasquin*. He could certainly have relied on the contemporary awareness that a 'pasquin' was a lampoon posted in a public place. For all the good humour of this play, its anger is more sharply focused than in any of Fielding's previous dramatic work. To be sure, the comedy of the contested election between Court and Country leads to the cynical conclusion that 'better herring is in neither barrel', but Fustian's tragedy, which forms the second of the plays-within-a-play, occupies the desperate territory of *The Dunciad*. Tricked by the combined forces of religion, the law and medicine, Queen Common-Sense is dethroned by Queen Ignorance, and can only protest:

Could Common Sense bear universal sway,
No fool could ever possibly be great.

Ever since *The Beggar's Opera*, the epithet 'great' had, in theatrical parlance, referred to Walpole. Fielding would soon carry it to its grotesque peak in the moral topsy-turvydom of *Jonathan Wild the Great* ('a great Man, which is to say a great Rogue'), but the identification of greatness with corruption was already established. Life imitated the stage during the excise crisis, when effigies of Walpole were burned alongside effigies of Sarah Malcolm, the murderess - the great politician and the great criminal enflamed together. In *Pasquin*, Harlequin is presented as the sworn enemy of Common Sense. Fielding has here employed his characteristic trick of satirical superimposition. Harlequin is both John Rich and Walpole: Rich, the manager of one of the 'royal' theatres (Covent Garden) and debaser of theatrical standards through his preference for pantomimes, and Walpole, manager of the country and debaser of moral standards by his trick of

'cheating according to law'.²⁵ What we cannot now know is how the character was costumed or padded. It was a trick of the cartoonists to indicate Walpole by the blue riband he proudly sported after George I conferred on him the Order of the Garter in 1726. Harlequin in a blue riband would be Walpole superimposed on John Rich (or John Lun as he called himself when playing his favourite role of Harlequin). Few politicians have been easier to caricature than Walpole as J. H. Plumb describes him:

Walpole was a short, dumpy man, weighing rather more than twenty stone. His arms and legs were short; his heavy head sprang almost straight from his shoulders. His features were large and coarse - square double chin, strongly marked black eyebrows, straight, thinnish mouth, with a thick, protruding underlip, a sharp emphatic nose. . . . He had a trick of munching little red Norfolk apples to sustain him during the debates.²⁶

Political cartoonists of the period were not much interested in distorted likenesses. They would pick Walpole off by his blue riband, sometimes by his belly, almost never by the sheer bulk of him. But that is not to say that the theatre was equally reticent. If George II could be iconographically pinned by the size of his rump and the habit of kicking his hat or his servants when in one of his frequent tempers, Walpole could be theatrically lampooned by almost anything from Norfolk apples to grotesque padding. It is probably because the stage can show so much more than can be *read* that eighteenth-century politicians were so nervous of it.

For a few years from 1736, Fielding was associated with the party-in-opposition of the Prince of Wales. The initial contact was probably made through his partner, James Ralph, who wrote for the press on the Prince's behalf. Frederick Louis was neither so negligible a figure as his posthumous nickname 'poor Fred' implies nor so exalted as Bolingbroke tried to make him when he used him as a model for his influential essay on 'The idea of a Patriot King' (1748). Still the object of his parents' unswerving hostility, he was at last permitted to marry and, in April 1736, Augusta, Princess of Saxe-Gotha became also Princess of Wales. Frederick was, by then, flattered to be the centre of attention for the cabalistic members of the Rumpsteak Club, who rightly assessed that he shared their resentment over the King's neglect. These were men, recently powerful but marginalised since the excise crisis: Carteret, the Earl of Chesterfield, the

Dukes of Bolton and Bedford. Also of the company were Bubb Dodington, Pulteney and Fielding's school-friend, George Lyttelton. Marriage had raised the Prince's status and he would remain a thorn in Walpole's side during the remainder of this parliament. Indeed, his decision to use his influence in Cornwall on behalf of the opposition in the 1741 election would be a contribution in its own right to Walpole's eventual fall. Unusual among the early Hanoverians, Frederick was fond of the theatre,²⁷ even employing the veteran James Quin to train his children in dramatic art and elocution. Also unusual was his possession of a common touch. The City of London, in defiance of George II (who was anyway in Hanover at the time) granted him its Freedom. Not long before, he had signalled his opposition to the Gin Act of September 1736 by purchasing a tot of gin in a city tavern, fully aware as he was of the popular 'No Gin, no King' slogan of the Gin Rioters. Such gestures were not the least of Walpole's worries when the troublesome year of 1736 came to an end.

Fielding could not have anticipated, as the new year began, that it would see the virtual end of his theatrical career. *Pasquin* and his successful management of the Haymarket theatre had carried him to new heights. He was happily married, patronised by the best of the opposition nobility and living in reasonable hope of future prosperity. For Walpole, on the other hand, the new year started ominously. Storms had delayed George II's return to England, and there were fearful rumours of his death by drowning. To universal astonishment, Walpole had survived the transition from George I to George II ten years before. The change from George II to Frederick I would be another matter. But the King returned safely on 15 January, not in the best of tempers. To his recurrent affliction of piles was now added an adjacent fistula. It is sadly true that George II had trouble with his buttocks literally to the end. He was furious to hear of the opposition proposal to present a bill to parliament calling for a doubling of Frederick's annual allowance of £50,000. In 1728, the first of his governments had voted to set aside £100,000 for the Prince, and it was George II's personal decision that his son's annual award should be half that. Walpole was understandably nervous about the likely success of this challenge to the royal prerogative. He spoke lucidly enough in the Commons to persuade the Tories to abstain and the opposition motion was defeated by 234 votes to 204. It was through Queen Caroline that Walpole habitually sought to calm the King, but the year 1737 began badly and

never improved. A new opposition weekly had commenced publication in January. Chesterfield and Lyttelton were prominent among its contributors, and it flattered Fielding by taking as its title *Common Sense* in order to advertise its antecedence in *Pasquin*. The issue of 19 March contained the first of a two-part 'Vision of the Golden Rump'. The rump in question was George II's, and that, particularly now, was no laughing matter for the King.

In his dream, the visionary 'landed in a pleasant Meadow, in which were several fine Walks, like Greenwich Park'. There he sees magnificently dressed cavaliers who are, explains an elderly gentleman, 'the Noblesse of the Kingdom' on their way to celebrate the annual Festival of the Golden Rump. This Golden Rump, as is soon made clear to contemporary readers, is none other than George II, easily identified by his bowel-problems, and by his habit of kicking his servants, just as the Queen is identifiable by her attempts to placate him:

She had in one Hand a Silver Bell, and a Golden Tube in the other, with a large Bladder at the End, resembling a common Clyster-Pipe. The Bladder was full of *Aurum potable*, and other choice Ingredients, which at proper Seasons, was injected . . . into the fundament of the Pagod, to comfort his Bowels, and to appease the Idol, when he lifted up his cloven Foot to correct his Domesticks.

The Chief Magician is then identified as Gastor Argos (Walpole) 'from his Belly, which was as prominent as the Pagod's Rump' and from the fact that *ex Officio* he supervises the collection of the 'annual Offerings, to which the whole Body of the People were obliged'. There are references to George II's sexual appetite, to the Orders of the Bath and the Garter, to Walpole's placemen, who are 'in Truth his Slaves' and to many other abuses of government and hierarchy. The celebrity of the 'Vision' was enhanced by the publication of an extract in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of March 1737 and by the exhibition and circulation of a satirical print called 'The Festival of the Golden Rump' ²⁸ In the centre of the print, a naked George II in the guise of a satyr stands on a pedestal. Suspended above is a curtain, embroidered with golden rumps. The inscription on the pedestal, unidentified in any of the recent authorities, is a quotation from the *Aeneid* (I, ll. 85-6), roughly translatable as 'the east wind, the south wind and the south-west wind rush down together with storms'. Suiting action to pedestal, George II farts one way while lifting his foot to kick the other

way. Queen Caroline hopes to calm him by administering an enema with an orb containing liquid gold, while Walpole, a fat-bellied chief magician makes a placatory gesture with his hand. The peers at his right shoulder are adorned with golden rumps, Walpole with dragons (in *Common Sense*, his rod becomes a dragon, devours the gold that is brought as an offering and reverts to being a rod). Opposite him is his shabby brother Horatio, 'Balance-Master of Europe', with scales, whilst behind the Queen is a bishop with a stick (either the lame Hoadly or the dying Archbishop Wake). The sub-title of the print, 'Rumpatur, quisquis rumpitur invidia', is dog-Latin, rendered in *Common Sense* as 'Whoever envies me, let him be RUMPED'. The reference, as in its usage by the Rumpsteak Club, is to those who have had the King's back turned on them - who have been 'rumped' - but we should take note that his back is necessarily to us, who look at the print. Whether Walpole drew the King's attention to the original 'Vision' or the derivative print is not recorded, but in view of the measures he was about to take against the London Theatres, I would think it likely that he did, if not in March, then probably in May of 1737.

Two days after the Golden Rump issue of *Common Sense*, the Great Mogul's Company presented a new play by Fielding at the Haymarket. The brevity of *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* is its fundamental joke. As Medley, the author of the play-within-the-play, explains, 'if I comprise the whole actions of a year in half an hour, will you blame me or those who have done so little in that time?'. There are three main scenes in Medley's play, each featuring a Walpole surrogate. In the first (acted by a man called Smith, who was probably fat) he is the 'first and greatest' of five politicians, and the one who, whilst never speaking, calls the tune. He is, though, presumably among the 'Omnes' who say 'Ay, ay, ay' to the fifth politician's twice-stated, 'hang foreign affairs, let us apply ourselves to money', who say 'Hum' to the question of how they are to 'come at' money, and then 'Ay, ay, ay' to the resolution to come at it by laying a tax on Ignorance rather than Learning, because the income will be so much greater. The scene is short because, Medley explains,

They have finished the business they met about, which was to agree on a tax. That being done, they are gone to raise it, and this, sire, is the full account of the whole history of Europe, as far as we know it, comprised in one scene.

Walpole's next appearance is more startling. Played in travesty by

Colley Cibber's rebellious and utterly extraordinary daughter Charlotte Charke, Walpole is now superimposed on the familiar contemporary figure of Christopher Cock (here Christopher Hen), the auctioneer. To a gaggle of society ladies, including Walpole's own wife as Mrs Screen,²⁹ she/he auctions such commodities as 'a most curious remnant of political honesty', 'a most delicate piece of patriotism', 'three grains of modesty', 'one bottle of courage' and 'a very neat clear conscience', but there are no bidders. Only when the lot is 'a very considerable quantity of interest a court' is there a chorus of offers. In the third scene, Walpole reappears as Quidam (= 'a certain person', played again by fat Smith). His role is to make fools of four false patriots who, like him, measure patriotism in terms of self-interest. Between the second and third of these scenes, there is an extended theatrical interlude in which Fielding outdoes himself by displaying Walpole simultaneously in three characters; as Colley Cibber, as Cibber's brutish son Theophilus and as the bastard offspring of the god Apollo. This interlude is introduced by Medley through a characteristic similitude:

You may remember I told you before my rehearsal that there was a strict resemblance between the states political and theatrical. There is a ministry in the latter as well as the former, and I believe as weak a ministry as any poor kingdom could ever boast of. Parts are given in the latter to actors with much the same regard to capacity as places in the former have sometimes been, in former ages, I mean. And though the public damn both, yet while they both receive their pay, they laugh at the public behind the scenes.

In the dialogue that follows, the bastard-god and the two Cibbers exhibit their ignorance by their attempts to 'correct' Shakespeare's *King John*, a play, incidentally, which was more immoderately admired then than it is now.

Limited, as we are, to reading Fielding's play, we are unlikely to share the vehemence of its original audiences' response. There is none of the pointedness and little of the passion of Pope's *One Thousand Seven Hundred and Thirty Eight*, which may, nevertheless, obliquely refer to it. What alarmed Walpole's adherents was, I think, the sheer plenitude of the images of the great man projected by Fielding's play. Not long after Fielding had added to it the terser and nastier afterpiece *Eurydice Hissed*, Walpole's mouthpiece the *Daily Gazetteer* began a series of articles recommending that plays be made subject to stricter censorship. Fielding's

'Dedication to the Public' in the edition of *The Historical Register and Eurydice Hissed* published on 12 May 1737 is a witty rejoinder in the *faux naïf* style so dear to the Scriblerus wits. To the *Gazetteer* writers who accuse him of impugning Walpole, he first tells the story of two gentlemen, who were walking the street, when one pointed at the sign of an ass hanging above and said, 'Bob! Bob! Look yonder! Some impudent rascal has hung out your picture on a signpost'. The short-sighted Bob at once remonstrated with the landlord:

The poor landlord, as you may well conceive, was extremely astonished and denied the fact, upon which the witty spark, who had just mentioned the resemblance, appeals to the mob now assembled together, who soon smoked the jest and agreed with him that the sign was the exact picture of the gentleman. At last, a good-natured man, taking compassion of the poor figure whom he saw the jest of the multitude, whispered in his ear, 'Sir, I see your eyes are bad and that your friend is a rascal and imposes on you. The sign hung out is the sign of an ass, nor will your picture be here unless you draw it yourself.'

This is to attack while seeming to defend, and Fielding extends the tactic in an attempt to answer the question, 'who is this Quidam?'

Who but the Devil could act such a part? . . . Gold hath always been his favourite bait, wherewith he fisheth for sinners, and his laughing at the poor wretches he seduceth is as diabolical an attribute as any. Indeed it is so plain who is meant by this Quidam that he who maketh any wrong application thereof might as well mistake the name of Thomas for John, or Old Nick for Old Bob.

This is clever writing, addressed by a thirty-year-old to a tiring politician twice his age. By 1737, the list of talented men whom Walpole had manipulated out of office was of Thatcherite proportions. Threatened by an angry King and an obstreperous heir to the throne, he was inclined to seek revenge. To many of his contemporaries and to some modern historians, the thought came that Walpole was losing his notorious nerve in 1737. The duck's back was absorbing water.

By the middle of May, as Fielding was certainly aware, the freedom of the stage was under greater threat than at any time since the Interregnum. On 20 May, Walpole told the House of Commons of his intention to bring in a Bill proposing an amendment to the Theatrical Licensing Act of 1713.

Its design, despite the failure of Barnard's Bill only two years earlier, was to establish the Lord Chamberlain's authority over both plays and playhouses. The next day, 21 May, Fielding published in *Common Sense* a further riposte to the *Gazetteer* papers. He there defended ridicule in such a way as to return us to our scatological theme. Through a healthy constitution, he explained, the laxative of ridicule can pass without any ill effect, but if it meets such 'foul Distempers' as may be spread by ministerial politics, 'it is apt to give a terrible shock, to work the poor Patient most immoderately; in the Course of which Working, it is ten to one but he beshits his Breeches'. When he wrote this, Fielding was probably not aware that Walpole had in his possession - it was to be his trump card - a manuscript play (or was it no more than a compilation of stage directions and snatches of dialogue in the popular burlesque form?) of mysterious provenance, evidently entitled *The Golden Rump*. Parliament's chief business in May was the passing of retrospective legislation on the Porteous Riots which had taken place in Edinburgh the previous year. Walpole had laboured long on this, diligently seeking out ways of reconciling differences that proved irreconcilable. He was committed to support of the Bill, which not only disabled the former Provost of the city from holding future office but also fined the city a sum of £2,000, which sum was to go to the widow of Captain Porteous. Insulted both personally and patriotically, the Duke of Argyll, leader of the Scottish peers, moved into opposition. The Bench of Bishops had suspended their almost automatic support of Walpole over the Quaker's Tithe Bill the year before. Now, with his hold on the Scottish peers slackened, Walpole was no longer in confident control of the House of Lords.

Under such circumstances, it would not have been surprising if Walpole had skimmed on his preparation of the case for a strengthened Theatre Licensing Act. The opposite is true. As with all legislation that really mattered to him, he prepared the ground with care. *The Golden Rump*, if it ever existed, has disappeared. Walpole read extracts from it to a slender House on 24 May, when the Bill was presented. They were evidently shocking enough to convince the sceptics of 1735 that something must be done. The opposition was ill-prepared, still pre-occupied with the repercussions of the Porteous Bill. Cobbett's *Parliamentary History* (vol. X, 319-41) gives the Licensing Bill scant attention, scant but contradictory. In one sentence it tells us that the Bill 'passed through both houses with

such dispatch that it was ready for the royal assent by the 8th. of June; and accordingly received the royal assent on the 21st.' and in the next sentence, 'In both Houses, we are told, there were long debates, and great opposition to this Bill in every step it made'. The Earl of Chesterfield's famous speech in defence of liberty is quoted in full. No other speaker is mentioned, though the extensive quotation from William Coxe's *Memoirs of the Life and Administration of Sir Robert Walpole* ends with the suggestion that 'It is most probable that Lord Chesterfield alone spoke against the Bill.' Hervey's *Memoirs* disagree, but only slightly: 'In the House of Commons little opposition was made to this Bill by anybody of note but Mr Pulteney, nor in the House of Lords but by Lord Chesterfield'.³⁰ What is certain is that Walpole contrived for the Bill an astonishingly easy passage into law.

The true story of the extraordinary episode surrounding *The Golden Rump* will probably never be known. Much later, Horace Walpole claimed to have found an excerpt from the play in Fielding's own hand, but that is, on most counts, less likely than an alternative explanation provided in the spurious, burlesque autobiography of Theophilus Cibber - that Walpole commissioned it himself. There is, in fact, no convincing evidence that such a play was ever written. Using nothing more than the cartoon 'Festival of the Golden Rump', a resourceful hack could readily have composed enough scurrilous dialogue to provide Walpole with material for his Commons speech. One name that appears consistently in contemporary accounts is that of Henry Giffard, manager of the playhouse in Goodman's Fields. The favourite story of writers favourable to Walpole is that Giffard was so shocked by the tone of the manuscript submitted to him - unsolicited, of course - that he felt compelled to show it to the prime minister, but anyone who believes that will believe anything. A nice twist is provided by a politically astute version of the Giffard plot in the *Rambler's Magazine* (1787, pp. 484-5). According to this writer, Walpole 'caused a piece of two acts to be written, fraught with the most pointed sarcasms on the late king and his ministers'. He then had the manuscript delivered to Giffard, some of whose plays had offended him, in the hope of catching him out. But Giffard was too smart for that and instead took the manuscript to Walpole in the hope of scraping his way into the minister's good graces:

Immediately on the departure of Giffard, Sir Robert took the copy to

the king, and read the whole to him. The sovereign, who possessed as good a heart as any in his dominions, was not an Alfred in ability. He was subject to the most violent gusts of passion, but on this manifested the most ungovernable disposition. He expressed a desire to cut up every theatre in England by the roots. The *amiable* servant however waited till the tempest had subsided, and then reconciled his master to the constitutional and effectual operations of an act of parliament. A bill was immediately introduced, and, what deserves particular notice, passed the legislature in the course of a very few days.

The particular virtue of this version is that, unlike others ancient and modern, it places George II in the frame, as I have no doubt whatever that he was. It is unlikely to be accurate in every detail. Inconsistencies, such as Hervey's claim that Walpole had got into his hands not one but *two* plays in manuscript, will always remain. But we need to remember the tensions in the royal household in 1737 if we are to bring political understanding to bear on theatrical legislation.

The Prince and Princess of Wales were at Hampton Court, as well as (rather than *with*) the King and Queen. The four unmarried princesses were there too, the elder two almost as hostile to Frederick as his parents were. The February furore over his son's allowance still rankled with the King, and his piles, despite a painful lancing, were not cured. When Augusta announced that she was pregnant, the Queen disbelieved her, persisting in the belief that her son was impotent. Not surprisingly, Frederick spent as much time as he could in the city. His glee at the anti-ministerial shafts in Fielding's *Eurydice Hissed* at the Haymarket was reported to his father. Walpole would have seen to that if Lord Hervey were not in place to do it for him. It served Walpole's turn that George II should be displeased by what he heard of Fielding's activities. The political reality was that Frederick, who had been a phantom threat to his father from the day of his birth, was now a real threat. I have the impression that Walpole, without sufficient reason, feared that Fielding's plays and his playhouse were effective sites of dangerous opposition. George II would have needed no persuading that Frederick was somehow implicated. By involving, however obliquely, the royal prerogative in the parliamentary debate on the licensing of plays and playhouses, Walpole avoided the repetition of Sir John Barnard's fate.

There is good reason to suppose that Walpole, having succeeded in curbing the stage, would have liked also to curb the press. Even those who had little good to say of the contemporary drama were fearful of that. Pope was already thinking and would soon be writing that 'Truth stands trembling on the edge of Law'.³¹ As if, perversely, to confirm the worst, action was taken against *The Craftsman*. A paper of 2 July 1737 slyly alluded to the Licensing Act by proposing that Shakespeare's more inflammatory texts - *King John* again and *Richard II* - should be prudently censored. The printer Henry Haines was arrested, released on bail, but later fined £200 and sent to prison for a year. During parliament's summer recess, Nicholas Paxton was flexing his muscles, presumably on Walpole's instructions. But if Walpole was contemplating an assault on the press through parliament, he had not the confidence to say so. The King's standing, rarely high, was seriously undermined when the Prince of Wales fled from Hampton Court with his wife, then in the last stages of pregnancy. The unprecedented scandal kept tongues wagging through the summer of 1737. Separately established in Kew, Frederick could now play host to the leaders of the opposition. The death of Queen Caroline in late November deprived Walpole of his surest friend at court. By the end of 1737, his position had significantly weakened.

The Licensing Act effectively ended Fielding's career as a playwright. It is not certain that his plays were the major factor in provoking the 1737 Act, nor is it clear that this intentionally repressive legislation was the major inhibitor of the development of English drama that it has sometimes been described as. Contemporary libertarians feared for the future, whilst paying scant attention to either Fielding or the present condition of the theatre. As his later preparedness to exonerate Walpole shows, and as his activities as a magistrate underline, Fielding was not at heart a libertarian.³² He differed from Walpole, above all, in his attitude to literature. Fielding belonged to the tradition that viewed men of letters as centrally engaged in the improvement of society. Between 1734 and 1741, that view turned Walpole into his enemy. The political classics of the Whigs out of office included Machiavelli's *The Prince*, at least in its contrast between *virtù* (active engagement or, as Henry Neville translated it, 'public spirit') and corruption (lack of social or political concern, what students nowadays call 'apathy').³³ Corruption in this sense was not the means but the goal of Walpole's political system. Because he actively discouraged the

incorporation of men of letters into the system, he was 'Bob the Poet's foe'. His punishment, in the malicious imagination of his artistic enemies, should fit his crime. If Walpole in his heyday had turned his back on them, 'rumped' them, their revenge, after his fall, would be to stick a clyster up his bum, as Indiano does in a print of 1742 entitled 'Brother Robert under his Last Purgation'.³⁴ 'I am grip'd with the heavy weight of the Nation', complains Walpole. Cardinal Fleury, his devious French ally, has just removed the clyster, fearing that his labour is in vain as a jet-stream of liquid shit flashes past him. Meanwhile Walpole's illegitimate daughter (now married into the Churchill family) by Maria Skerrett tries to stimulate her father's genitals ('How is it, Merry Cocky?'), evidently to no effect, since the curious little devil above the empty trunk ambiguously regrets that there is 'Nothing left for poor Miss'. There is, so far as I know, no justification for this incestuous slur. Walpole's enemies were bent on returning unscrupulousness to its source.

After the parliamentary upsets of early 1742, Walpole, as his contemporaries might have said, lost his 'bottom' and resigned. George II, however, did not lose his. It features in a print dating from August 1742 under the outrageously punning title of 'Magna Farta'.³⁵ Walpole has so far escaped impeachment, but the two-faced ministry of Pulteney and Carteret is indistinguishable from that of their corrupting predecessor. 'Dad's own face', says a nurse at the palace window, gazing out into the courtyard where a raree-show is in progress. Carteret and Pulteney draw the puppets of the 'modern opposition' on leading strings towards the stage, where Harlequin (who might still be Walpole) abuses them as 'Knaves all'. Meanwhile the dragon of the secret service consumes bags of gold and George II farts at everybody in general, preparing to wipe himself with 'Magna Farta' while his closet attendant holds in readiness 'A further report', a *double-entendre* implying both a second fart and yet another missive from the committee of enquiry into Walpole's conduct in government. 'Bottoms' haunted George II in the 1740s as 'rumps' had haunted him in the 1730s. The move towards a 'broadbottom' government under the Pelhams inevitably attracted the attention of caricaturists. In one print, 'A very Extraordinary Motion',³⁶ the Pelhams are about to force-feed the reluctant King with the vast bulk of the Tory Sir John Hynde Cotton when he has scarcely had time to evacuate the Tory before. In another,³⁷ Cotton occupies pride of place (or, to be more precise, his vast buttocks do)

as the 'broadbottom' parliamentarians follow the fashion of shitting on the people.

It is an irony of history that, on 25 October 1760, George II died, as they say, 'at stool', a martyr to his bowels. Much in his life became him like the leaving of it.

Notes

This essay, in a slightly expurgated form is scheduled for publication in the journal, *Literature and History*.

¹ See Rogers, N. (1989), *Whigs and Cities: popular politics in the age of Walpole and Pitt*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 20-21.

² See Liesenfeld, V.J. (1984), *The Licensing Act of 1737*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.

³ See Skinner, Q. (1974), 'The principles and practice of opposition: the case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole', in Neil McKendrick, ed., *Historical Perspectives: studies in English thought and society in honour of J. H. Plumb*, Europa Press, London, p. 109.

⁴ *British Museum Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires*, no. 1797, reproduced in Paul Langford, *Walpole and the Robinocracy*, Chadwyck-Healey, Cambridge, (1986), p. 51.

⁵ BMC 2447, reproduced in Langford, p. 169.

⁶ For an account of this satirical poem, which was found among Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's papers in c. 1970, see Isobel M. Grundy, 'New verse by Henry Fielding', *PMLA* LXXXVII (1972). There is a useful commentary in Donald Thomas, *Henry Fielding*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, (1990), pp. 53-4.

⁷ *Horace Walpole: Memoirs and Portraits*, ed. Matthew Hodgart, Batsford, London, (1963), p. 97.

⁸ *Walpole and the Robinocracy*, p. 31.

⁹ BMC 2140, reproduced in Langford, p. 115.

¹⁰ For a full account of Steele's managerial career, see John Loftis, *Steele at Drury Lane*, Berkeley, Cal., (1952).

¹¹ See Michael Harris, 'Print and politics in the age of Walpole', in Jeremy Black, ed., *Britain in the Age of Walpole*, Macmillan, London, (1984), pp. 195-6.

¹² Cited in Bertrand A. Goldgar, *Walpole and the Wits: the relation of politics to literature, 1722-1742*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, (1976), p. 64.

¹³ A high proportion of more than £50,000 Walpole authorised for printed ministerial propaganda from 1731-1741, the greater part of which was spent before 1735, when resources were concentrated on a single journal, the *Daily Gazetteer*. See J. A. Downie, 'The development of the political press', in Clyve Jones, ed., *Britain in the First Age of Party, 1680-1750: essays presented to Geoffrey Holmes*, Hambledon Press, London and

Ronceverte, (1987), pp. 119-21. Also the same author's 'Walpole, 'the Poet's Foe'', in *Britain in the Age of Walpole*, p. 179.

¹⁴ David Erskine Baker, Isaac Reed and Stephen Jones, *Biographia Dramatica: or, a Companion to the Playhouse*, London, 1812, vol. 3, p. 54. The play was almost certainly the work of Rev. James Miller. (See Calhoun Winton, 'Benjamin Victor, James Miller, and the Authorship of *The Modish Couple*', in *Philological Quarterly*, 64, (1985).)

¹⁵ Cited in Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Cited in Jeffrey Hart (1965), *Viscount Bolingbroke, Tory Humanist*, London, p. 82.

¹⁷ Dickinson, H.T. (1973), *Walpole and the Whig Supremacy*, English Universities Press, London, p. 143.

¹⁸ Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution*, Sphere Books edition, (1969), p. 130. (Originally published by Thomas Nelson, London, (1961).)

¹⁹ Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, p. 361.

²⁰ Rogers, *loc. cit.*

²¹ BMC 2423, reproduced in Langford, p. 223.

²² Paul Langford, *The Excise Crisis*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, (1975), p. 149.

²³ H. Williams, ed., *Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, Oxford, (1963-65), vol. iv, p. 436.

²⁴ A footnote explains that 'There was at this Time a Project on foot for erecting a Play-House in St Martins le Grand'.

²⁵ The phrase, according to *Fog's Weekly Journal*, was proverbially applied to Walpole's ministry. See Rogers, *Whigs and Cities*, p. 52.

²⁶ J. H. Plumb, *The Four Georges*, Fontana Library edition, Collins, London, (1966), pp. 73 and 75. (Originally published by Batsford, London, (1956)).

²⁷ See H. W. Pedicord, *By Their Majesties' Command'. The House of Hanover at the London Theatres, 1714-1800*, Society for Theatre Research, London (1991).

²⁸ BMC 2327, reproduced in Langford, p. 131.

²⁹ The screen was, perhaps, the most common derisory image for Walpole. It originated in the *canard* that he had hidden the perpetrators of the South Sea fraud from the law, even abetting the fund's cashier, Robert Knight, in his flight to France. 'Screen-master General', 'Bob the Screen', 'Robin Screen' and 'King Screen' were among his nicknames, and the screen appears regularly in satirical prints of the period as a visual image of corruption.

³⁰ *Memoirs of the Reign of George II*, ed. J. W. Creber, London, (1848), vol. 2, p. 254.

³¹ Dialogue Two of Pope's *Epilogue to the Satires*, line 249. The first dialogue is also known as *One Thousand Seven Hundred and Thirty Eight*.

³² Robert D. Hume explains Fielding's silence after the 1737 Act by suggesting that Walpole bought him off, perhaps by paying for his legal studies. See *Henry Fielding and the London Theatre, 1728-1737*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, (1988), p. 252.

³³ I am indebted to Quentin Skinner for this contrast between *virtù* and corruption. See his subtle 'The principles and practice of opposition' in *Historical Perspectives*. (See note 2).

³⁴ BMC 2533, reproduced in Langford, p. 233.

³⁵ BMC 2575 reproduced in Langford, p. 251.

³⁶ BMC 2613, reproduced as plate 55 in Herbert M. Atherton, *Political Prints in the Age of Hogarth*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, (1974).

³⁷ BMC 2621, reproduced in Atherton as plate 56.

9—

Irony and the Historical

Robert W. Witkin

The importance of Irony in modern art and literature and, more latterly, in the intellectual sciences and in culture generally, can hardly be overestimated. For some writers, the cultivation of irony is the most essential qualification for any thought, any art or literature or social or political theory to be truly modern. Thus, in an article on social theory published recently, Charles Lemert refers to irony as the discursive form of post-modern social theory ¹, claiming that "irony is the only and necessary attitude for theory today" and that "postmodernism is an ironic general theory". Writers in a different tradition^{2, 3} have noted the 'cancerous growth' in the use of irony in art and literature throughout this century. Ironies of text and voice have become the hallmarks of good taste in the realm of the literary, the dramatic and the aesthetic. We associate irony easily with humour, but we recognise, too, that irony can be bitter and even tragic. It is always a reflection of the Janus-faced nature of reality, of its paradoxical and contradictory character. As a tool in the hands of the skilled wordsmith or painter, irony corrodes and undermines pretensions, unmasks appearances, deconstructs. In the present paper I want to open up a few possibilities for theorising and historicising irony. Fixing on the widely accepted beginning of the modern concept in the eighteenth century, I shall analyse its developmental trajectory both forwards and backwards from that time. The analysis is not a full or complete one. It is more in the nature of a sketch.

It is remarkable that so central a category in modern intellectual life should have appeared on the intellectual horizon so late in the day. According to Muecke⁴, The word 'irony' did not appear in English until 1502 and did not come into general literary use until the eighteenth century. Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie*⁵ translates 'ironie' as 'drie-mocke'. Up

until the eighteenth century irony was thought to be simply a rhetorical device, the practice of using language in an ironic fashion in order, intentionally to achieve some purpose or to realise some special effect. Irony exploited those situations in which appearances were not merely different from reality but were directly contradicted by reality. Whether you were a victim of the irony or an appreciator of the irony depended upon how you were situated with respect to this contradiction. Irony was particularly effective for wringing the humour or farce out of a situation where one could presume two audiences, an unknowing victim of the irony and an all-knowing appreciator of the irony. When one of the suitors besieging Penelope discourses in front of the disguised Ulysses about the impossibility of the master of the house returning, Homer's readers presumably appreciated the irony much as we do. Similarly, speech might be used ironically in order to promulgate an argument one despised as a means of satirising it. D. Mueke suggests as an example of this, the ironic defence of slavery, offered by Montesquieu in his famous work *The Spirit of the Laws*.

The peoples of Europe, having exterminated those of America, had to enslave those of Africa so as to have someone to clear all that land. Sugar would be too dear if one didn't have slaves to cultivate the sugar-cane. The peoples in question are black from head to foot; and their noses are squashed so flat that it is next to impossible to feel any pity for them. One cannot bring oneself to think that God, who is so wise and judicious, would put a soul, and above all a virtuous soul, into a body that is black all over.⁶

We are familiar with this kind of irony down to the present day. From Swiftian satire through *Monty Python* to the most recent alternative comedy.

Romantic Irony

However, in the eighteenth century the concept of irony (and the forms of literary and cultural practice upon which this concept was brought to bear) underwent a major development, one might almost say an explosion. We associate that development very much with the philosophers of the German Romantic Movement, most notably the Schlegel brothers and Novalis. Irony was no longer seen simply as a case of someone saying something in an ironic way in order to realise an effect. Irony now came to be seen as a

certain relationship between human subjects and the world, even more as a condition of human subjects in the world. That condition involved the recognition of a fundamental and unbridgeable gap between the subject and the objects of his or her thought and experience. The forms of everyday life are fixed by language; they are particular, limited and conditioned, whereas the subject is unlimited and unconditioned and is, therefore, incommensurate with them, surpassing them in every way. The subject is an infinite creative potentiality.

This meant that the subject was no longer securely situated in the world but was suspended, reflexively, somewhere above it. The critical distancing of the creative subject from the world is realised aesthetically through irony. Shakespeare's vision of the world as a stage and of men and women as 'merely players' with their exits and entrances is a profoundly ironic and ironising vision, one that calls in question the truth or reality of the social order in a way that was to be repeated by sociologists such as Erving Goffman in our own century ⁷ - in Goffman's world, social life is analysed as a play, a fiction, a set of 'performances', which suggests that the actor as a subject is not identical to, or commensurate with, the part he or she plays.

It is this critical distance between the subject and the world which becomes a focus of theorising in the eighteenth century and it is this same distancing conceived of as a process that the Romantic theorists referred to as irony. For the Romantics, the truth of the subject always stood in a contradictory relationship with both the thought which expressed it in language and with the created forms of the world. At the heart of Romanticism, therefore, is a loosening of the relationship between subject and object. Objects are no longer seen in absolute terms as complete and self-contained, as embodied value or spirit. With the Romantics, a certain tension enters into the relationship between subject and object. The relationship between the forms of the world and the spirit or value invested in those forms becomes a more problematic and tentative one. The forms of things come to be seen as partial, as limited and incomplete. An ironic attitude towards all one's projects and roles and creations was therefore implicitly a condition of one's freedom as a creative subject. It was also the basis of a truly critical consciousness which called in question both the world as it is lived and the subjects who live it. Social and political arrangements could be seen as transitory, not as the only possible world but

as one possible world among many. Nature was seen by the Romantics not as a being, but as a becoming, as an 'infinitely teeming chaos, a dialectical process of continual creation and de-creation'.⁸ The human subject was said to be like nature, creative and de-creative energy, pouring itself into created forms while transcending those created and limiting forms through adopting an ironic and critical self-consciousness towards them.

A writer like Shakespeare was able to distance himself from his characters sufficiently to call in question their motives or their understandings or the reality of their situations. In this he stood in relation to his characters much as a God to his creatures. His creativity as a subject surpassed the forms in which it was expressed and these forms were subtly 'deconstructed' in the very process of being constituted. The appearance of this deconstructive process, this distancing of the author from his characters, this irony, was seen by the Romantics as the entry into the work itself of the creative process, that is, of the coming into being of the work, a process that transcended the finite forms constituting the work. In a deeper sense this process mirrored the relationship between men and women and their projects in the world. Irony was thus seen by the Romantics to provide a glimpse of the infinite; and the creative process in art, a model for the life-world.

When we get beyond the simple empirical ironies that result from the deceptive character of appearances which are contradicted by reality, ironies which result from incomplete or limited knowledge, the inability to be in two places at once and so forth, we encounter the deeper origin of irony in the metaphysical dualism which divides the world into spirit and matter. Inevitably, the attempt to square the demands of everyday life with those of a higher transcendental realm results in contradictions and absurdities. From the standpoint of the 'simply human', irony can be used to call the gods in question. Irony then becomes a double-edged weapon. Being ironised, being a victim of irony, calls in question the truth of that which is contradicted by one's fate. In the very act of bringing down the victim, the gods dethrone themselves and in that dethronement is the promise of liberation for the victim. This more fundamental irony is the antidote to the metaphysical; it is eternally deconstructive.

However, this metaphysical dualism is realised differently in different types of society. The distance between the transcendental and spiritual realm and the material everyday profane world may be very great indeed,

as it was in archaic civilisations. In European society, from the Renaissance onwards, that metaphysical dualism has been progressively driven closer to the ground. The gods and goddesses of the spiritual have given way to new trans-historical and 'mythic' structures such as the 'individual', the 'state' and 'civil society'.

The eighteenth century represented something of a watershed because it is at this time that the critical and ironic temper of the age succeeded in undermining the higher transcendental structures in pursuit of the claims of the lower. This, it seems to me, is the essence of the movement of irony. It is always directed by the lower element of the metaphysical dualism at the higher. When the higher is overcome, the dualism re-establishes itself at a lower level. In the eighteenth century, the dualism was re-established on a materialist basis. This represented an altogether new level of self-consciousness and self-awareness, including awareness of the role of irony. The eighteenth century, therefore, becomes critical, not only in the construction of modern social forms but also in the construction of a modern self-consciousness and of the 'historical' view of societies in the past. The 'historical', which becomes the target and victim of a new ironic voice, is but the form of the new metaphysical and trans-historical structures of the state, the individual and so forth . . .

In everyday life, we tend not to identify an individual as a whole with this or that mood or expression or this or that particular behaviour, but invoke the notion of some continuous self that is realised in the many different attitudes and expressions assumed. All such categories become 'totalities', teleological structures that exceed in every way the limited and particular forms they assume in everyday material life. Like the individual personality, however, these abstract totalities, the community, the state, the family, social institutions and so forth, can only become concrete and historical through their being realised in the particularity of everyday life. In this process, the events of everyday life, of biography and of history, become a kind of aliment through which, as ideas, these metaphysical entities develop and grow while remaining essentially and recognisably themselves. When we invoke the concept of the nation, of the state, of the rule of law and even of the human personality, we are appealing, whether we realise it or not, to our sense of symmetry, of continuity through time and change, to something we can know as the 'essential Fred' or the 'essential Julie'; in other words to our sense of the historical. What is

necessary to the historical, as defined here, is the sense of entities, such as the state or the personality, as enduring through the changes and exigencies of everyday life. It is as though the various realisations of such entities in the details of everyday life, the daily practices of courts and parliaments or the everyday behaviours of individuals, are all manifestations of the same underlying entity, the same 'state' or 'personality'. The sense of the historical is closely associated with the record of change and transformation in such abstract totalities through experience. It is this which gives rise to the concept of 'development' or of 'progress', as applied to individuals, institutions, the nation-state or whatever.

In modern societies, the events of history are seen as constitutive of these (historical) structures. History, as real events, becomes 'food' for the historical. As historical entities, the abstract social totalities such as the state, the individual, and so forth, are made to mediate experience, by assimilating events to their own forms and by accommodating themselves as structures (changing and developing themselves) in order to do so. I believe that it is possible to argue that modern societies consume their history in the much same sense in which Levi-Strauss argued they did, when he characterised 'hot societies' as those which consume their history. In my terms such societies do not simply have a history. All societies have that. They become historical.

With the development of industrial society the gods were dethroned. However, the same dualism between an 'eternal' metaphysical being and a transient world of events was re-constituted. New abstract totalities arose (the people, the state, etc.) and these constituted a new trans-historical metaphysical superstructure, giving rise to a sense of the historical as development and progress. Becoming historical, making personal biography, personal development, the development of nations, means somehow being both trans-historical and becoming (through history) historical. And it is this paradoxical and double-faced nature of reality that is the root of the modern ironic vision emerging in the eighteenth century.

The formal problematic concerning the individual and his/her projects in the world can be clearly seen in the eighteenth century with the cultural mediation of events, in revolutionary France, by trans-historical structures that were not fully of their own time, structures conceptualised ideal-typically, not with their own contents but with those of classical Greek and Roman culture. The painting by Louis David, for example, of the death of

Marat, turns a squalid and gruesome murder of a political tyrant into a poetic epitaph for a classical hero. This tendency to imbue material events with a higher material form was closely analysed by Marx in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. The protagonists of the French revolution represented their struggles to themselves in terms of the heroic exploits of classical Greece and Rome, and Napoleon the Third dressed his assumption of power in the historical robes of Napoleon the First. The irony (both tragic and farcical) of the inevitable contradiction between appearance and reality is not lost on Marx.⁹ These actors on the historical stage seek to realise some larger transcendental meaning in their everyday lives and relations. In doing so the trans-historical comes to mediate their actions and therefore a sense of the problem of becoming historical enters history itself and infects it with metaphysical desire. Marx considers that the revolution of the future will not have to resort to any such idealising forms but will be able to experience its heroic moment in its own unadorned and material terms. From a late twentieth-century perspective, however, Marx's own material categories and the entire historicist mode of thinking are equally infected with metaphysical ghosts and open to the same relentless and ironising critique.

The Novel

The novel was the eighteenth-century genre in which the corrosive work of irony could be most clearly seen. So much so, that Lukacs has actually termed the novel an 'ironogenic' form. The typical novel centred on the unfolding of a story (biographical), which concerned local and particular events and described absolutely particular people but which was mediated throughout by the more or less unsuccessful attempts of its principal characters to realise transcendental values through their projects and to imbue their lives with meaning. The 'problematic hero' of the novel, according to Lukacs, is transcendentally homeless, unable to bring inner and outer reality, society and personality into a meaningful unity.¹⁰ The problematic hero, no less than those historical 'heroes' (equally problematic) discussed by Marx, is not able to relate to the world without metaphysical and transcendental pretensions. The problematic hero's transcendental pretensions are seen, through irony, for what they are. Whether the metaphysical pretensions are those of Don Quixote imitating his chivalric hero or of Madame Bovary and her attachment to romantic

fiction heroines or of Dostoyevsky's 'Eternal Husband' and his dependence upon his wife's seducer, all such characters seek unsuccessfully to realise some larger transcendental meaning in their everyday lives and relations.

In his brilliant analysis of the novel (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*), Rene Girard draws attention to the triangular nature of desire in the novel: ¹¹ the tendency of characters to be gripped by a metaphysical desire which is to be distinguished from natural desire. Don Quixote worships Amadis, his chivalric hero, and seeks in his relations with others to imitate Amadis. The contradiction thereby engendered, throughout the novel, between appearance and reality, throws up irony after irony. Triangular desire is treated by Rene Girard as a kind of metaphysical sickness. The greater the intensity of metaphysical desire the weaker the natural desire, that is, the direct and unmediated desire of the subject in relation to objects. The more the world is mediated for the individual subject by a transcendental other, the more false is his or her relationship to life, the more his or her predicament has to be seen as ironic. Instead of living life as it comes and giving vent to one's nature and natural feelings, the individual lives in dependence upon and imitation of some transcendental 'other' (no matter how close and worldly this other) and this imitation robs the individual of any spiritual home in the very world it is intended to authenticate. The inner and outer life are now hopelessly at odds with one another; we tilt at windmills. But to say that the novelist can see and present to his readers the irony of his hero's inevitable failure is to imply only an understanding of the problem, not its abolition; there is still the further step of seeing his or her own work in the same light, as being itself an attempt to make sense of the world and so equally open to irony.

This metaphysical and ironogenic tension at the heart of the novel has a developmental history and dynamic of its own. Irony is doubly corrosive. Increasingly, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the ironic vision of modernist literature has been directed not to the (failed) attempt to realise a trans-historical subject in the world but to the absolute absurdity of all such projects. By the twentieth century, the individual personality, the nation, the state, institutions, even the institution of art itself, were being called in question for their metaphysical pretensions and were themselves made the subject of new and powerful ironies.

Modernism entails a serious onslaught on the transcendental, a move to rid the world of sensuous material events of its transcendental spirits, its

ghostly infection. Nietzsche's cry that God is dead may be said to inaugurate this purging of the transcendental but Nietzsche himself found the task difficult and we find him preserving these ghosts in the form of the historical and even in the statistical theory of eternal recurrence. Any thoroughgoing attempt to remake life will involve exorcising its metaphysical ghosts. The final form taken by these ghosts is that of the 'historical', which I have argued arises from the mediation of everyday life by trans-historical forms. The abolition of the historical, of the development of the grand narrative, of the continuity of the project, is difficult, because ordinary life is filled with the historical and every action carries its imprint whether the actor knows it or not. Only through the deepest and most thoroughgoing irony can the historical be purged from history.

The Nixon Tapes

At this point, I want to introduce a digression, albeit one that is very much to the point. I have always been fascinated by the Watergate affair. My fascination centres on the fundamental ironies of the affair. In a television interview recently, David Frost recounted a warm-up conversation he had with Richard Nixon just prior to his famous interview with him following his resignation as President. He asked Nixon how he had got on with Brezhnev in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. Nixon had said something like "You know David - I pity those guys, Brezhnev and the rest. What a political system. They can never be sure that every word they utter is not being taped". Frost was particularly amused by the fact that Nixon seemed completely unaware of the irony. My attention was drawn, however, not to this irony, which is the kind of simple irony that a knowing audience at any time might enjoy, but a much greater irony that owes a great deal to the development through which the historical becomes present as a mediating force in history, in public life.

Why did Nixon talk into a tape-recorder in the first place? Why did he keep the tapes running at all times? Why did he keep the tapes and not destroy them while that was still possible? Whom was he addressing? Clearly he was addressing people in the Oval Office, people he was conducting business with and clearly he thought it important to keep a record of everything. However, it appears that in making these tapes he somehow saw himself as addressing history, as recording it no less. His

relationship to others was clearly mediated by his sense of himself as a historical person, as a significant historical being. The tapes represented history, the historical record. The supreme irony here is that the historical record he produced in order to assure his value in a transcendental posterity turned into the incriminating record which destroyed the presidency it was supposed to vindicate.

Now we might be inclined to see this as tragic irony or comic irony in the classical sense. Nixon was undone by the historical in much the way that the Gods or fates undid Oedipus. True, we are less inclined to see Nixon as innocent. However, there is a more serious reason as to why we are, I am inclined to think, less likely to view the irony in these terms. Unlike the people of classical Greece, who believed in their gods, we no longer believe in the god History. Our sense of the irony in the case of the Nixon tapes has another dimension. It is easy to see the irony as the absurdity of the act of making the tape, of addressing a non-existent transcendental entity, history, with a view to having it validate your existence, your status. To those who no longer believe in such metaphysical ghosts, Nixon's project, like all such projects, is simply absurd.

Irony and the Absurd

Such ironies are not unlike those to be found in the armoury of modernism, in its art, its literature and its theatre. They take the form of a cultivation of the absurd. Life is absurd, not because the individual has failed to realise transcendental values in his or her ordinary life in the world, but because these values do not exist. There is no larger story, no larger meaning to give life significance; and, insofar as the very springs of action disclose the presence of these metaphysical ghosts, they appear, to the ironic vision, as absurd, as impossible pretensions contradicted by the non-existence of what is presupposed by them. The irony of the nineteenth century was directed at the impossibility of realising the transcendental in the world, that of the twentieth century to the non-existence of such values and the absurdity of a reality that presupposes them.

In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in the act of waiting, we experience the flow of time in a heavy and immediate form: it is time devoid of any sense of the historical, of development or progress of any kind. Each slice of action in the play interrupts or stops the slice preceeding it. Nothing can

get anywhere. If the events of the play can be said to constitute a history, it is a history devoid of the historical. If we truly accepted things for what they are then there would be no absurdity or irony in modern life. The fact that we experience this absurdity through Beckett and others is consistent proof of our inability to lay down the metaphysical baggage. The presence of this metaphysical baggage is fundamental to the existence of irony. Without it there would be no place for the ironic, no gap or dualism to be ironised.

Beckett's characters are not simple individuals who live in the moment without claims upon any larger scheme of things. They are complex souls in reduced circumstances shuffling through metaphysical ruins which guide their every footstep. They are cut off from any living history, any development, anything historical. There is nothing cumulative, or progressive about their shuffling steps. But a history of sorts might be reconstructed with the methods of an archaeologist, of an expert on ruins. If Beckett's characters are funny, part of that humour arises from the incongruity of actions which presuppose a continuity, a historical development and completion, when there isn't one. Beckett's characters are hung about with the ruins of the historical; they are clown-like in their seeming so oddly fitted for the emptiness they inhabit. It is not history that is rejected here, not the continuous Heraclitean flux, the endless process of change, but the historical, the notion of an enduring and continuous totality, a personality. Such a continuity from which we seek to wrestle meaning and significance, is, for Beckett, a retrospective hypothesis and a prospective fiction. In a passage from an essay of Beckett's on Proust, the following observations appear:

There is no escape from the hours and the days, neither from tomorrow nor from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us or been deformed by us. . . . Yesterday is not a milestone that has passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday. The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being - the problem of the nature of the self, which being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore ever outside our grasp - personality, whose permanent reality can only be apprehended as a retrospective

hypothesis. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, sluggish pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of pass time, agitated and multi-coloured by the phenomena of its hours.¹²

Beckett conjours for us a world without metaphysical pretensions, a world in which not only God but even the historical is absent, in which the fundamental metaphysical dualism underpinning the taken-for-granted world is dissolved in the acid of an ironising vision. The historical is about continuity persisting through change. Like a bouncing ball that changes its position at every instant and is subject to continuous deformation, but which nevertheless remains recognisably a ball, so the individual, the society or the state etc., are conserved in the sense of the historical. This is the line of thread in the labyrinth which is missing in Beckett and Ionesco. There is no thread. When the boy appears in the second act of *Waiting for Godot* to announce that Monsieur Godot will not come that day, we are told it is the same boy who appeared in the first act but it is clear that the characters are not aware of that fact. Indeed, the very absence of any sense of historical time is indicated by the gesture of suggesting a change of season between the two acts by hanging two or three leaves on the tree which is part of the set. So when Beckett speaks of the heaviness of time, the dreadful passage which weighs so heavily, it is time that drowns the historical. Jameson and others have drawn attention to the altered temporal relations in a post-modern world, invoking the notion of the present-centred and ahistorical experience of time. Jameson has even described all post-structuralist thought as intrinsically anti-historical and has, like so many others, invoked the schizophrenic's consciousness of time as symbolic of a more general cultural tendency in the modern world.

The internal development of the forms of irony, of the stages in the development of an ironising vision in modern culture, in art and in literature, has its ground in parallel developments in capitalism and in capitalist society. The eighteenth century is seen as a watershed between pre-industrial and industrial society. The latter is associated with the rise of manufacturing and of factory production, the large-scale movement of people from country to town, the development of towns and a growth in their numbers and so forth as well as the development of privacy and a greater measure of individualism. The trigger initiating the development of a new and enlarged notion of irony was no doubt provided by these

material developments. Similarly, the development of an industrial and increasingly mechanised capitalism, the growth of large-scale monopolistic organisations and so forth and the more recent emergence of a so-called post-industrial capitalism, can be seen as closely linked to the development of the ironic vision in the art and literature of the twentieth century, in the paintings of Magritte or Marcel Duchamp, of Picasso and Gris, of Futurism as well as Dada and Surrealism and later in the Pop Art of the 1950s and 1960s. However, if the Romantics initiated a process - more a programme - (romantic irony) which has only achieved a degree of completion in the late twentieth century, it is also the case that they initiated with this same concept of romantic irony a retrospective historical re-interpretation of past literatures making use of this concept.

The Retrospective History of Irony

Irony is something of which the eighteenth century became acutely conscious. Classical Greece was not conscious of irony in the same sense at all and although Aristotle and others were explicitly aware of the important aesthetic principles involved in the construction of both comedies and tragedies, irony did not assume a prominent let alone a central role. In the re-interpretation of these works, however, it does do so.¹³ Much is written on the subject of Sophoclean irony and, because of the nature of the concept of irony as it has developed since the eighteenth century, it matters not at all that Sophocles himself would have been unlikely to see the principle of construction in his work as that of irony. It is possible, too, when armed with the modern concept of irony, to recover the ironies of the Old Testament and of the New and of diverse literatures of the past - just so long as we remember that it is we who are interested in irony and the history we construct reflects that interest, leaving open, for the present, the question of what relationship such a history has to the events of the time.

We might argue that history develops in a continuous alternation between periods of irony and periods in which there is little disjunction between the form and content of experience. However, we might need also to argue that the disjunction is differently constructed in different periods and that this results in different modes of irony and of the ironic. In principle, we should be able to historicise this, to cast it in developmental terms. The disjunction between the ordering of experience, its metaphysical superstructure, and its lively content, is expressed in so-called

traditional societies such as those of classical Greece, in terms of the relations between Gods and Immortals on the one hand and mortals, usually superior or important figures such as Kings or Queens, on the other. In Sophocles' tragedy, *Antigone*, for example, the claims of kinship and tribal loyalties and those of the developing and all powerful civic duty are set in opposition. That is how Hegel saw the essence of tragedy, as a fundamental opposition between two sets of values. However, the important point is that there is an asymmetry here. Both sets of values are equally justified but one is somehow greater, more comprehensive in its claims. The claims of kinship are no less just than those of civic duty but the source of political order is bound up with the latter. What is just and honourable is punished. Antigone must die. There is a terrible irony that runs through Sophocles. Oedipus is innocent, an upholder of the law for whom incest and patricide are crimes he wishes to punish. He is even armed with foreknowledge about his fate and makes every effort to avoid it. The foreknowledge is part of the instrument by which his fate is brought about and, despite his innocence, he blinds himself and exiles himself and his mother hangs herself. The tension separating the King from the Gods engenders irony, but irony of a tragic order. Things are just not what they appear to be. Who is guilty? Who is innocent? Why are the Gods to be praised?

In the Old Testament scriptures, the God of Abraham is singular not plural. The level of abstraction in monotheism appears to be higher. The people are related to each other as a whole in and through their personal relationship to this singular God and there is, as a consequence, a unified space both moral and historical through which this people and these people travel, and in terms of which their projects can be formulated. With the Hebrews, God is at work in history. What must continually be tested is their submission to and adherence to this unitary God. No other claims must take precedence if that unitary moral and historical space is to be preserved. However, it is always threatened by other claims and, therefore, the absolute claim is put to the test in great trials of faith. The irony involved in the sacrifice of Isaac called for by God places duty to God in opposition to duty to kin, sets the duty to God the Father against the duty of an earthly father towards his offspring. Contrast the irony here with that of Sophocles' Antigone and her struggle with Creon.

In the Old Testament, God is still the transcendental God that rules

from above. In Christianity, that God actually descends to earth and enters into mankind and therefore more intimately into the making of history - that is comes to operate through man, from the inside as it were. This brings together the transcendental principle and the material and bodily subject in one being - a Man-God. The contradiction between appearance and reality and between the finite and the infinite is now acute. The miracles, the parables, the guilt and execution of the innocent, everywhere indicates the most enormous upheaval in the human project and provides new sources for profound irony.

Again, the space that opens up here is distinct. It is the space between the Christianised spirit and the secular and profane world. The internal development of Christianity, particularly the development of the Reformation, centuries later, effected a further transformation in the working of the transcendental principle and therefore of the structuring of irony. In effect, God became truly operative and present in the entire secular world and men and women came to be seen, through the Lutheran and Calvinist doctrines of the vocation, as instruments in the hands of God, making His kingdom on earth. The more dedicated the individuals were to making that kingdom and the less they indulged themselves in worldly pleasures - that is, the more they saved and the less they consumed, the more assured they were about their personal salvation. The great irony was that this development resulted, as Max Weber ¹⁴ so cogently argued, in the feverish dedication of a merchant class to the creation of capitalism, to the pursuit of the most powerful materialism ever known, in the name of a devotion to a great transcendental God and to salvation in another (spiritual) world. Material and commercial life, profane under Catholicism, was sanctified in the early days of capitalist development and brought under monastic discipline.

In the space allowed me I have been able to do no more than to indicate a general outline for an historicising of the theory of irony. I said it would be a sketch but it is very incomplete, even as a sketch. It will not have escaped the reader who has followed the argument that such an attempt is itself not free of irony. Through historicising the abolition of the historical in the ironic vision of modern culture, art and literature, the text defiantly proclaims the historical. But then again. . .

Notes

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10—

Psychoanalysis and Humour

Paul Kline

What follows is, I hope, a fitting epilogue to a series of discussions of humour because psychoanalysis explains both why we laugh and what we laugh at, thus, at a stroke, rendering further discussions redundant.

Almost the whole of the Freudian theory of wit and humour is contained in one volume - *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* - published in 1905 - and most of what I have to say can be found there. However, before the Freudian theory of humour can be understood it is necessary to discuss briefly psychoanalytic theory in general, because the theory of humour is not really specific at all, but is a part of Freud's attempt to explain all behaviour, down to the last detail.

For Freud, our true motivation is unconscious and unless our unconscious becomes known there can be no real understanding. According to psychoanalytic theory, in the unconscious may be found two basic human drives, sex and aggression, together with all the other things that are unacceptable to oneself and society. Of course, as is now well known, Freud greatly widened the meaning of sexuality and this must be mentioned since, as is obvious, sex, sexuality and its lack, are eternal favourites for wit and humour, always have been and, unless there is a radical change in the biology of human beings and civilisation, always will be.

In Freudian theory sexuality does not begin with the onset of puberty. On the contrary, it is present at birth, the infant being described as a polymorphous pervert, by which is meant that pleasure is obtained from the stimulation of any part of the body. Around the age of one year this pregenital erotism, as it is called, centres on the mouth, and sucking and biting become all-important - the oral phase. It is possible to be fixated at this stage and in adult life oral pleasures become all important. Thence on to the anal stage where the retention and expulsion of faeces becomes the source of pleasure. This anal erotism is almost always completely repressed

in Western societies, thus becoming unconscious. From this stage the child, about the age of five, enters the phallic stage where the penis and clitoris, *per se*, become the erogenous zones, although this is far different from the adult genital sexuality. At this age the Oedipus complex develops, in the boy the desire to sleep with his mother and kill his father. Fearing talion revenge by the father, castration, (the castration complex) he represses his Oedipus complex and both become unconscious. The boy enters the latency period, a time of freedom from turmoil, until the awakenings of puberty. The development of the girl must be different. She, aware of the anatomical differences between the sexes, fears that she has been castrated and thus, driven by penis envy, a concept which itself drives feminists to disagree with Freud, turns from her mother, her first love, to her father. Penis envy is, of course, repressed.

Do I foresee, I can hardly help it, the reader's unbelieving laughter? Yet, as we shall see, it supports the Freudian case. Before turning to the theory of wit and humour three more concepts should be mentioned. In psychoanalytic theory, the mind, like ancient Gaul, is divided into three parts: id, ego and superego. The id contains the basic instinctual drives and what is repressed and is entirely unconscious. The ego is mainly conscious, and strives to keep in touch with reality. The superego is the moral aspect of mind and is formed, at the time of the Oedipus complex, by identifying, in the case of the boy, with the father. 'You shall not' becomes 'I shall not'. Thus is conscience born. The healthy mind maintains a balance between these three components. In the psychopath the id is too powerful, in the neurotic the superego reigns.

The task of civilisation according to psychoanalysis is to control the id. Let loose, we should live in a barbarous world where sex and aggression and other repressed drives were sated at will. A world of death and destruction, rape and pillage. As you can see civilisation has made a pretty bad job of id control. In fact this control has many forms.

At the personal level the ego tries to control the id by what are known as defences. In projection, for example, we project unacceptable traits on to others. Thus outgroups are seen as oversexed, dirty, mean and whatever else is culturally unacceptable. In repression the unacceptable is forced back into the unconscious. In reaction formation we form an attitude the opposite to the unacceptable idea. For example, vegetarians who hate killing animals fear their own aggression, egalitarian socialists their

feelings of superiority. There is no greater lust for materialist wealth than in a Marxist.

At a cultural level the arts allow us to express vicariously what is normally forbidden. Not for nothing do the great enduring works of literature portray the Oedipus complex: *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, to name but three. Dreams too, in Freudian theory, allow the expression of unfulfilled wishes. Each dream contains a wish disguised, disguised by dream work, unconscious twists and changes, of which symbolism is a well known example (although Freud, an inveterate cigar-smoker who could not abstain from smoking even with cancer of the mouth - truly his priorities were correct - argued that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar). There is a final defence against the violence of the id - humour - and thus, at last, the real subject matter of this discussion has been reached.

Joke Work

Joke work refers to the technique of jokes. It is normally unconscious, below the level of awareness, and refers to the technique, the tricks by which jokes are made. Of course, these tricks can be done consciously and script writers make full use of them. These techniques are perfectly obvious if one scrutinises jokes and they can be dealt with quickly.

1. *Condensation*: Words and ideas are compressed. 'Old men in their anecdotage' exemplifies this aspect of joke work.
2. *Dividing up words*: Words in a phrase and sentence are divided up in an unlikely and surprising manner to produce a new meaning. The script writers Muir and Norderm utilize this technique.
3. *Multiple usage*: 'Bottle scarred and battle scared warriors' exemplify this technique.
4. *Double meanings*: Puns are a subset of this category. The word 'it' has a definite sexual meaning in popular humour, a meaning, furthermore, which never seems to fail. (All these are types of condensation according to Freud's analysis of joke techniques.)
5. *Displacement*: Here the emphasis is on an alternative meaning to a word. Freud's example is taken from the humour of the Galatian Jews, as are many of the jokes in his book, and they appear to have been, or had the reputation of being, a peculiarly filthy bunch. Of

course there may be some tribal rivalry involved, but I am not a sufficient historian of psychoanalysis to be able to say. The joke is: 'Have you taken a bath?' 'Why, is there one missing?'

6. *Absurdity*: An example from Aristophanes: 'Strike me alive', said by a character in Hades.

7. *Sophistical reasoning*: A person, on being accused of damaging a borrowed kettle, responds with so many excuses that they are themselves incoherent and thus suggestive of guilt.

8. *Unification*: As the name suggests unexpected unity is created as in the comic definition of a tromba Marina as a trumpet in C.

9. *Representation by opposites*: Cf., the Shakespearian joke. 'I can conjure up Spirits.' 'Yes, but do they come?'

10. *Reference to the similar*: Another joke from Galatia - two Jews outside the bath-house: 'Another year gone by'.

So much for the main techniques by which jokes are constructed. There are a number of points which should be made about them before we go on to consider the most interesting aspects of Freudian theory.

First, all these mechanisms appear in dream work, the mechanisms by which the real meaning of the dream (the latent meaning) is disguised from the dreamer, thus creating the strange, bizarre quality of most dreams. All this joke work is unconscious. Jokes just appear in your head, usually unbidden. When you need to make jokes it is often difficult and script writers need long sessions at the word processor.

Conscious joke work (as distinct from unconscious) is often very clever but rarely funny. We must have all come across jokes and humour which are indubitably ingenious but which leave us cold. These are jokes which are all technique but lack purpose. Indeed that is why the jokes of academics, if they even make any, are so humourless. They are all technique because academics are all reason. The unconscious is kept repressed through fear. Such fear elevates reason beyond everything and no jokes may flow.

I have introduced into this discussion the notion of purpose and I must now turn to this point - the purpose of jokes and humour.

The Purpose of Jokes

In Freudian theory there are two classes of jokes.

a. *Innocent or trivial jokes*: In these the source of laughter is the

technique. As has been shown these are rarely funny.

b. *Tendentious jokes*: These have two purposes, one hostile, the other obscene (often concerned with exposure). Anyone who has examined the walls and ceilings, and in extreme cases the floors, of a gentlemen's lavatory, should find little difficulty in accepting this argument.

The joke beats the repression of the sexual and aggressive drives and is thus a mechanism of defence. It provides a release from tension. Beware the humourless and the solemn. From them arise the killers. Of murders 95% are perpetrated by the nearest and dearest. Lovers, not muggers or burglars, are to be feared. Do you think the Yorkshire Ripper laughs, or Myra Hindley?

Thus the joke allows expression of the forbidden, but why laughter? Our yield of pleasure (laughter) equals the psychical energy saved by our not having to repress. Thus the more the joke touches upon what is repressed the more we laugh. Thus from laughter we can discover repressions and complexes. In jokes, as in wine, lies the truth.

Let us examine a few examples of wit and humour which most people find funny. I shall take Fawlty Towers. Why do we laugh at Manuel or Cleese raving on about the British defeating the Germans? In so laughing we express our repressed xenophobia and this is particularly funny for those who regard themselves as liberal and enlightened, those to whom *The Guardian* is the New Testament and the *Daily Telegraph* the work of the devil, the enlightened middle classes who have found it within themselves to forgive Belsen and Auschwitz (after all the real Black Forest gateau is quite different from what you find in Asda).

Take again that famous scene where Cleese whips his failing car. Expressed here is our hatred of machines and our tendency to anthropomorphise the car, tendencies which our rationality tells us are foolish. Yet we can catch a glimpse of it not only in humour but in our terminology: quality cars are said to be thoroughbreds, to reveal their class and breeding in their performance and even to be civilised. They are usually, like boats, female.

Auberon Waugh is generally considered to be a fine humorous columnist. He expresses again what many liberals have to repress: aggression and contempt for the poor and helpless, our fears of being like them. When he writes that he would rather be on the side of the snobs than the yobs, this is surely what many people feel but dare not say. Thus we

laugh. Now there are two interesting points to be noted about this type of humour. If the technique, the joke work, is not good, the writing becomes too direct and threatening. Our normal defences come into play and we reject it as disgraceful and not funny. Yet similarly those who hold these views directly, fascists and the National Front, would also not find them funny. They do not release repression.

From this analysis of humour it becomes perfectly obvious why so many jokes are concerned with sexual and scatological matters. These are the things which, even in our liberal and liberated society, are still repressed within the majority of the population. It also accounts for the fact that sexual jokes tend to be rather bad. Sexuality is so much a matter of repression that even the hint of it produces laughter. Of course this is less so for adults (although some men especially apparently never grow up) but it accounts for the adolescent delight in innuendo which, as every teacher knows, can make teaching remarkably tedious. As in art the joke work, the technique of the joke, allows the listener to hear the forbidden material.

Grotjahn in *Beyond Laughter* has elaborated Freudian theory and his notions deserve discussion. In tragedy, he asserts, the Oedipal conflict is clear: the son interferes with the lovemaking of the father. In comedy, however, there is displacement and the father interferes with the lovemaking of the son.

Thus the clown is an impotent father figure bedecked in the symbols of impotence: the huge tie, the baggy trousers, the phallic nose glowing red, and the cane. Notice how many comics have canes or walking sticks - Fields with his flexible billiard cue and Chaplin. Marx (the comedian rather than the economist, although perhaps he too was a comedian) leers, cigar in mouth, leering being a symbol of the primal scene, the parents in sexual congress. It is interesting that Lacan, the renowned French analyst, appeared in public with a bent cigar. In my experience of cigars his particular angle must have been carefully contrived. It was not such as might have arisen by careless handling. Other comics, too, like to employ phallic symbols, a well-known example being the Blackpool rock of George Robey.

Grotjahn extends his arguments to the Chad or Killroy, the enigmatic face appearing over walls, with phallic nose, awaiting castration, and staring eyes, the impudent son, the peeping Tom, appearing where he shouldn't. His upraised thumb, as he grips the wall, is the phallus erect and

the name itself is Oedipal (kill roi).

Finally, a few further points may be made. Jokes are essentially social. It makes no sense to express forbidden feelings in private. Thus one cannot, and, indeed, should not laugh at one's jokes. While the joke work must be sufficient to disguise or to allow the repressed material, the joke should be short and easy to follow. Too much intellectual consideration kills humour because it leads us to the real meaning which provokes anxiety.

In conclusion, it is clear that, even from this brief exposition of the Freudian theory, it accounts well for the curious nature of humour. It explains the content of much humour and why we laugh. Since it does so with concepts which are simply part of its general theory, it must be regarded as elegant and parsimonious.

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